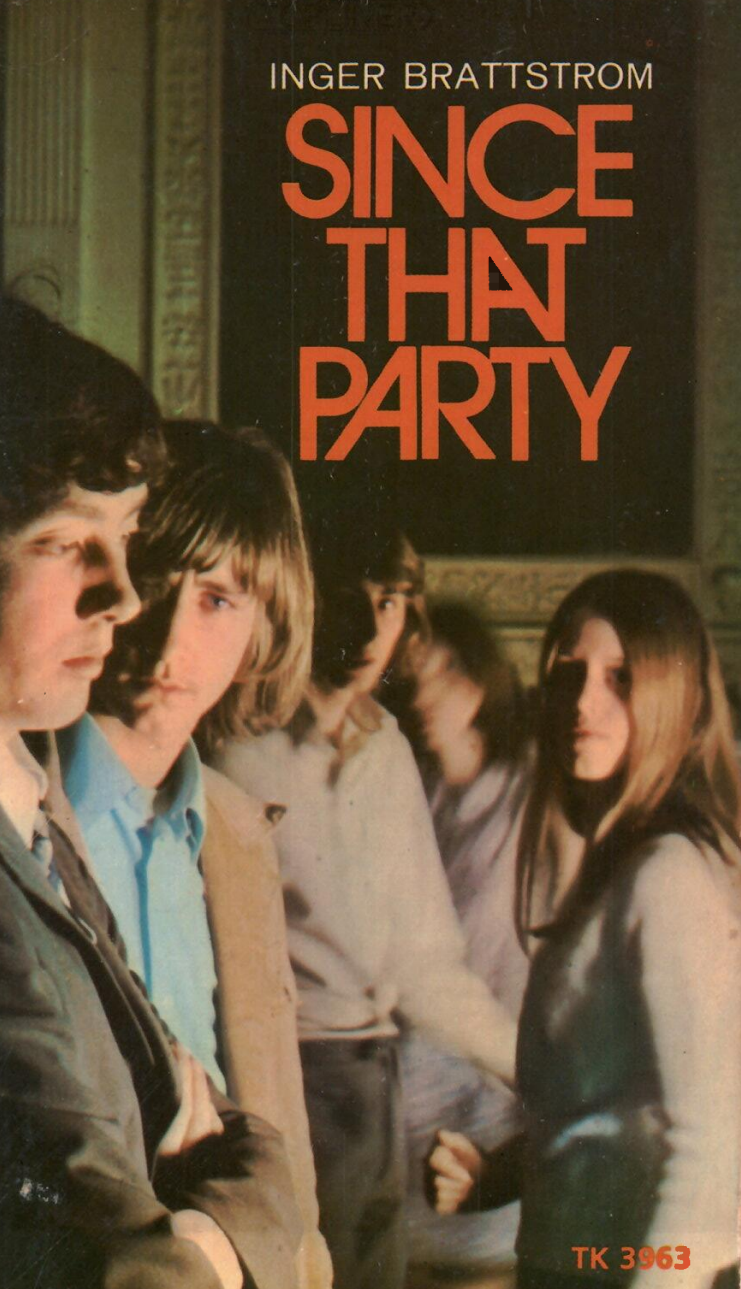


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INGER BRATTSTROM

# SINCE THAT PARTY

TRANSLATED BY
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# Prologue

A brief announcement in the paper. Just a few lines: "The teenage schoolboy whose disappearance was announced over the air on Saturday was found early Sunday morning in the wooded area south of the railway line."

Next to it a photograph, blurred, indistinct. Nicholas scarcely recognizable.

Stella sat gazing at it for a long time.

It had all happened so quickly they still couldn't believe it. One moment it was there, distressing, shattering, inescapable; the next it dissolved, faded into the background. Everything had changed.

It all began last Thursday. Thursday had been Nicholas's birthday — but they hadn't realized then that this was the start of things.

Five days had gone by, and it would all go on for a great many days yet. The headmaster's words at assembly: "Those whom the gods love die young." They would sit in church dressed up in their dark clothes. Many of them would cry, for it was all very sad. Many words, hackneyed

phrases. Words of comfort, words of explanation, even of apology. No one would ever know the real story, or how it had come about. And "why?" is a question no one could answer.

You couldn't judge Nicholas like the others, you couldn't expect him to act like everyone else.

The donkey prince, thought Stella. Nicholas was the donkey prince. That was no explanation either, but perhaps a slight consolation.

# 1

Friday. Yesterday had been Nicholas's birthday. A large party with all the trimmings. Tomorrow there was no school and they'd all arranged to meet at the clubhouse.

Stella was collecting her books together. Lessons were over for the day. Nicholas stood looking down at her, his large hands hanging empty at his sides.

"By the way — thanks for yesterday," murmured Stella, her face bent toward her desk, the long golden-blonde hair like a curtain across her burning cheeks.

How she hated those cheeks that gave her away! It still made her cross, and at the same time she felt sorry for herself.

Nicholas was red in the face too, but then he always was. His mouth hung half open like a door left ajar. Suddenly he looked happy, just because of the carelessly spoken words, "thanks for yesterday." Of course, he must be reading too much into them, taking them as agreement,

for shortly before he had asked her if she would go to the cinema with him that evening. An Italian film by Fellini.

Stella was immediately on the defensive. It wasn't fair. Something didn't make sense. Since yesterday evening nothing made sense.

And, of course, they had all heard. Most of them were still in the classroom, slamming their desks, scraping their chairs noisily across the floor, shuffling their feet. Eric was writing "No school tomorrow" on the blackboard; Madge was perched on the teacher's desk as if she had floated up there, like a little bird, her tight skirt way above her knees — which meant people had a much better view when she pulled it down! She preened herself, tugging and tugging at her skirt, as if tugging would make it longer. Close behind Stella, Barbara was waiting, her books under her arm.

"Shall we go?"

Barbara had been there yesterday. Christopher too.

Christopher was still sitting at his desk, the back of his head resting against the gray-brown mark on the wall — his very own mark. He yawned and took his time collecting his gloves, scarf, and last of all, his long legs. He hardly ever had any books with him, just a pencil and a small black notebook.

Nicholas was still standing there, looking ridiculously happy.

"It was nothing special," he shouted, and bent closer to Stella.

Now his face was quite close to hers. She could feel his breath on her neck. He always came close to people. Stella couldn't get used to it: it gave her gooseflesh.

It was only because he was hard of hearing. That's why he spoke so loudly and so clearly, as if he were giving dictation.

"Stella, would you like to come to the cinema tonight? There's a very good Fellini film on," he shouted for the second time, right in her face.

Stella had opened her desk-lid. She almost disappeared behind it and energetically searched for her French Grammar, Part Two.

They must all have heard. Nothing could be kept private, neither Nicholas's question nor Stella's answer. Without looking she could feel the quick glances of understanding, smothered laughter, the odd grin. Hm, so Nicholas is trying his luck with Stella. He would pick Stella!

Suddenly she had the urge to say in a clear, innocent voice: "I'd love to!" Just because of those eyes, those smiling faces, and their subsequent disappointment. She looked up quickly, shook the hair out of her face with one toss of her head, and felt Nicholas's wheezing breath on her. He looked happy. He always looked suddenly blissful when she said so much as a single word to him.

But she wouldn't put up with that blissful face.

She couldn't say, "Yes, thank you." Impossible! There was no face for which an expression of bliss was less suitable. It didn't suit those features. They didn't go together, like pink and violet. It might well be marvelous to make people happy, but sometimes it simply wasn't possible — as now, at the wrong time, in the wrong place.

Suddenly Christopher spoke up from his corner.

"Don't you understand, Nicky? Stella's not free in the evenings. You know that Stella and Gordon . . ."

The beam disappeared. Nothing, not the tiniest hint, remained on Nicholas's round, childish face. It was empty and flat, like his great hands. He gave a little sniff, as he always did when asked a question or caught unawares.

"Yes, of course. I just thought . . ."

Stella had found her French Grammar, Part Two. She nodded briefly at Nicholas.

"Perhaps another time?" she said softly, and went out into the corridor, Barbara following close behind.

"*Stella polaris* — the pole star! Rubbish — a meteorite, more like."

Chistopher's voice, rough and low, followed her. There was irony in it, and almost sour grapes. Stella found herself shrinking inside. Yesterday there had been Nicholas's party, and today everything was different. They all looked at her differently. There was nothing of the old Stella left.

She tied a scarf around her head, looking out

of the window as she did so, noticing from the naked upreaching branches of the trees that it was cold and windy. The clouds were scudding across the golden-red sky. On the golf-course the grass stood in grayish-white clumps like moss. It was winter: windy, snowless winter, unpleasant.

Stella almost ached with longing for snow. How was it that the ground and everything that grew longed for that protective blanket?

"We behaved very badly at Nicholas's house yesterday."

Barbara pulled a face. Why was Stella reproaching herself? It wasn't worth talking about, in Barbara's opinion.

"But it was nice of them to invite us all, don't you think? A lovely evening, good food, everything laid on. Stan and I danced a couple of times, then we sat together and talked. After all, there were enough empty rooms. It's always like that. Did anything special happen, then? I mean, something serious? It was obvious that Christopher was livid, particularly with you, Stella. But I wouldn't give it a second thought, if I were you."

Of course Barbara was right. That evening should have gone off quite differently. It was best not to think any more about it, to let the grass grow over it. Of course nothing had happened. Parties were always like that. The fact that it wasn't the right sort of thing on Nicholas's birthday — wasn't he himself to blame for that?

"Of course Nicholas can't have enjoyed the

party very much. Looked at from his point of view, the evening was a flop."

"He'll never get any real enjoyment out of parties like that. He's not the type."

That's how it was, that's how it would always be, thought Stella. Nicholas, with his large clumsy hands, his heavy, inflexible body, his poor hearing and coarse voice, just didn't fit on a dance floor among young girls. It was sad — but what could Stella do about it?

"Odd that he invited us at all. It must have been sheer masochism, mustn't it?"

When Barbara glanced at Stella she had to look down at her. Stella was small and delicate, and people never ceased to be amazed at her. That strange mixture of innocence and arsenic, of naïvety and cold calculation. Stella, the star with round eyes and angel's hair, floated rather than walked.

"But you know it was all in your honor. The whole party was laid on for you. That was obvious, and Christopher said so straight out. Nicholas asked him to arrange it for him."

Again Stella felt misgivings welling up inside her. She wanted to forget the whole affair.

"Is that my fault?" It was a helpless-sounding question. "And is that a reason for going to the cinema with him?"

It almost amounted to pestering, and it just wasn't fair. Nicholas had been sitting there in the front row for years and had snuffled excitedly when she had spoken as much as one word to him

or explained an exercise. Each time he had looked as though he were being given a present. You couldn't do anything about it, it was just his way. You had to put up with it and stay friendly and helpful as long as you could.

But then, giving invitations to parties, asking her to go to the cinema with him, suddenly being attentive and becoming almost pushing — that was new, something Stella couldn't handle.

"It's quite different with Christopher. You can refuse without feeling mean. But Nicholas . . ."

"Make it clear to him once and for all. You don't usually worry very much if you upset people or hurt their feelings."

Barbara always said things straight out. She had been going steady with Stan for more than a year now, and no other boy had paid any attention to her before him, so she had never had to "hurt people's feelings." She didn't know anything about it.

Stella suspected, though, that one day she would have to be really unfriendly to Nicholas, perhaps even ignore him completely, which was what she usually did to Christopher. She would be ashamed of herself if she did.

"You have to feel sorry for him; he's not well . . ."

Nicholas's illness was always played down. No one knew for certain what it was exactly, but it must be something secret and terrible.

"You mean his attacks, those fits when he suddenly collapses unconscious, and you have to

push something between his teeth, a piece of wood or a spoon . . . ?"

Stella shuddered. Barbara was so direct. She could discuss anything and everything without flinching at all.

"I don't think it's all that dangerous. In all these years that he's been at school with us no one's said anything or seen it for themselves. Anyway, there are sure to be medicines you can take to prevent it. The illness isn't as unusual as we think. Previously people thought that a spirit, a being, had flown into the sick person and taken possession of him. Dostoyevsky writes about it. He was an epileptic himself."

They seldom talked about this, but it was difficult not to think of it when Nicholas sat there in the front row, his hand cupped behind his ear, his mouth half open. You had to feel sorry for him and to be nice.

"At any rate, I can't go to the cinema with him. It's out of the question."

"You're afraid, Stella."

"Don't you see?" cried Stella. "I can't. Don't you understand? You can't go to the cinema with someone just because he's ill, because you feel sorry for him. Why does he have to ask me?"

Barbara looked down at her. She smiled slightly.

"They all do. They all want you. They all want to go to the cinema or dancing with you. Nicholas isn't any different from the others."

And after a pause she added: "I admit we behaved very badly yesterday . . ."

"Badly? We were quite unfeeling! Just as if Nicholas and his family hadn't existed," murmured Stella.

"We must send some flowers," said Barbara, quietly and sensibly, to put an end to the subject once and for all. Why keep harping on it?

Gordon was waiting on the stairs, tall and thin, the lean and lanky type. As they walked he bent down to Stella, so small and petite, in a protective gesture. Stella nodded to him, and Gordon's hand touched her shoulder for a second in quiet greeting. In it a trace of natural right of possession. That was new; that was just since yesterday, since Nicholas's birthday party. Gordon seemed relaxed and relieved, as if he had at last come to terms with something that had been difficult.

"Going home? I've got the car today, so can I drive you."

Stella shook her head. It was Friday, housework day. She knew what awaited her at home. On housework days her mother was quite beside herself, and there was always work for Stella to do when she returned. That wouldn't suit Gordon. What point was there in his coming? Cosseted, spoiled Gordon always seemed lost among Stella's restless family: her mother, highly strung and distraught, her younger brothers, with their train sets, boots, and colored crayons wherever you trod.

Anyway, she needed a breather. Barbara lived very near the school, and it would be pleasant to sit with her for a while, quite quiet and still.

"No, thanks, I'm going to Barbara's."

"I'll ring up later, then."

He was never stubborn; he could give way. Stella followed him with her eyes as he walked to the car, tall and gaunt. She seemed almost a stranger to herself, and she didn't know if she wanted to be with Gordon again. But, of course, she would have to.

# 2

Stella had seen it in one of her father's books — circles, rings, straight lines between. It was a diagram showing the sociological structure of a group, a cartographic sketch of the inter-reaction of individuals, their influence on and links with each other. It could be a class at school, or a sewing circle, or equally well a gang of juvenile delinquents. Each circle represented an individual, and the straight lines to the other circles showed the connections of this individual with others in the group. It was possible for so many lines to emanate from one circle that it looked like the sun, with rays in all directions. It was the "sun" who was the leader of the community, its motive force.

In most cases there was also a lonely circle right down at the bottom, in a corner, with only one line leading from it to another circle nearer the center of the group. There were circles without lines, too, although that seldom happened: lone wolves, outcasts, people who were in some way different. Stella was deep in thought, looking

at a lonely circle in a corner. It was a depressing sight.

Her father was a psychologist and had lots of books on such subjects. Stella found them interesting. She loved cut-and-dried pictures, diagrams of the various interrelations. Sometimes she saw the whole of existence as a diagram. Everything could produce curves on a graph, and everything was mutable. Stella and Barbara enjoyed depicting their own lives and those of their friends in diagrams like these. It was a special game. They sat, hardly exchanging a word, always intent on the next move. Barbara watched Stella's work with interest. Over and over again there were new surprising perspectives. It was simply amazing.

They didn't bother about every one of the numerous other people in the class. Stella hardly knew them all. Last autumn new people had come from other schools. They lived scattered over a wide area, some out in the country, others along the railway line, some in the town itself. Most of them had their friends and contacts from before, and the class couldn't merge into a new whole.

But from those friends — seven, eight, sometimes more — who met together regularly on free days, who went to the cinema together or to student dances in town, who sat in the grill restaurant on Saturday afternoons or drove out into the country in Gordon's car — from these you really could make a sociological plan. No,

they weren't a clique. "Clique" and "set" weren't very nice-sounding words, for they somehow assumed a common mode of behavior and sounded seditious, disquieting. No, they all simply belonged together and stayed together. That's how it had been all autumn and winter. And Stella was one of them. It was fun to show them all in a diagram.

"Each circle is a head seen from above. The lines are our arms reaching out to each other."

"But that means that some people will have lots of arms," stated Barbara.

Stella drew a large circle in the center of a sheet of paper and wrote her own name in it. She found it only natural. As a start. She experienced everything in relation to herself, felt herself to be the center. Nothing happened without her. No, she wouldn't say they all depended on her, or that she was the most important person, either. When I am there I see everything from my point of view, she thought. Everything happens and takes on reality because I see it and stand in the middle of it. That's when I experience life, not when Barbara tells me about things afterwards in her direct, unimaginative way.

That's why Stella drew herself as the circle in the middle of the sheet. She colored the circle yellow because she had fair hair. Next to it she drew a second circle and joined the two with a line. In the second she wrote "Barbara" and colored it blue; blue like Barbara's eyes. Besides, she felt that blue was Barbara's color. The "blue

flower" was supposed to be the flower of poetic imagination, but Stella didn't believe it. It was more likely red or velvet, for Stella needed suspense and excitement in her imagination. But blue was the color of clarity and suited the objective, well-behaved Barbara, that tall, strong girl, the school's star sportswoman.

Barbara was all right, and she was Stella's best friend. That's if Stella had a "best friend" at all. She wasn't clear about it herself; perhaps she wasn't the type for it? Still, it was pleasant to go home from school with Barbara, to sit for a while in that large, bright kitchen. It was a chance to have a breather before being swallowed up into her own large family. Barbara had just one elder brother, Paul. Their parents were seldom at home, and brother and sister were generally left to their own devices.

Stella drew a new circle, wrote Paul in it, and drew a line from him to Barbara. Paul was more of a friend than a brother, for the two understood each other remarkably well, considering. He was just as objective as Barbara, prosaic in the extreme. Stella colored him light brown.

Another line went out from Barbara, this time to Stan, her boyfriend. He was also in their class and a member of the hockey team. Stella thought he was like a brother, too, with a magic coat that could make him invisible despite his height of over six foot. Stan was always around, even when you didn't actually notice him. He always had his finished math prep. at everyone's disposal; he

wrote up the chemistry experiments, listed the French vocabulary in neat rows in his blue notebook and was always ready to lend it out. He was always punctual; he booked all the theater tickets, remembered birthdays, and never forgot any promise he made. He owned a moped and a fast motorboat that he had knocked together himself in the cellar last winter. Admittedly, there was only room for one in the boat, which was rather unfair on Barbara. In wet weather Stan wore galoshes and looked rather comic.

Then came Madge and her sister, Camilla, two more circles which Stella colored different shades of pink. They were inseparable. Stella joined them with a line. Camilla came out with them all sometimes simply because she was Madge's sister, but she didn't go to school with them. She worked in a hospital and was often on night duty. Madge was fond of Paul (that was a relatively new development), and, apart from that, she was very friendly with Barbara. The two lived very near each other. So there was a new line to Barbara, and then another between Paul and Madge.

It almost looked as though Barbara were the sun with all the rays in this game. Stella counted them and made four.

"You ought to be in the middle. You're the one who holds us all together."

Stella drew a circle for Gordon and then a line to her own circle. She chewed her pencil and thought for a long time.

Gordon. Of course, he belonged to her. He

was, however, also Stan's friend, and a line should be drawn across to him, too. For it was through Barbara and Stan that Stella had met Gordon. Would he be joining in everything if she weren't there? He always kept his distance from the others. And would she always be there herself if it weren't for Gordon? . . .

No, that was making it all too complicated. Stella couldn't sort it out. She filled in Gordon's circle with a darker blue, partly because blue was, after all, her favorite color, and partly because Gordon always had something reliable and matter of fact about him, just like Barbara. There was simply no fault to be found with Gordon — even if he wasn't as gorgeous as Stan. Nevertheless, he was good-looking and well groomed and always well dressed; he smelled of good soap, had a clear skin and white teeth; he played the piano and golf and was allowed to use his father's car whenever he liked. He was the best-turned-out young man Stella had ever seen. That was important.

She had read once, about someone or other, that he was "only a torso." She had found the description odd. You thought straightaway of ancient Greek statues without arms and legs, without a head. You really couldn't say that of Gordon, for he possessed arms and legs to an unusually high degree, by the yard, almost. You didn't overlook his head, either. Yet she still couldn't help thinking of that odd expression when she was with Gordon. Torso, she thought.

Somehow wasn't quite . . . wasn't quite complete. Something was missing, something important. Despite this, he was so engaging, so polite and charming.

"You go well together," remarked Barbara.

Stella knew that, and there was a reason for it: Gordon was the neatest, cleanest person one could imagine, and she herself liked everything very clean and hygienic. She just couldn't have things any other way. Now after this party at Nicholas's home . . . She drew a line across to Gordon and went over it again and again till it looked like a thick branch.

And Christopher. Yesterday he had said, "You're beautiful, like a doll in a shop window, little holy Stella. You two, you and Gordon, look like a glossy-colored photograph for a washing-machine advert. You'd be sure to make a go of it."

It could have been a compliment, but it wasn't. Stella could tell that from the sharp tone of his voice, could see it in the narrowed eyes. Christopher never paid compliments. Why didn't he leave her in peace? she asked herself. Why did he always have to make little digs at her?

"I think he hates me."

Barbara laughed.

"Do you remember how we were afraid of him in the junior school? We thought he was dangerous and kept well out of his way; all our mothers kept getting agitated and ringing up his father to complain."

Reflectively, Stella drew another circle, down

in the corner, just like the one she had seen. Christopher.

He didn't actually belong to their group, but he was nevertheless with them sometimes. He simply popped up, bare-headed, his leather jacket hanging open, the long green scarf fluttering like a pennant around his neck, shoes dirty, pipe between his teeth. Almost like his father.

Christopher was in their class. There was no other link. He sat right at the back, in the corner, his long legs stretched out in front of him, the back of his head leaning against the greasy mark on the lead-gray wall. He wore his greasy fair hair combed back from his forehead, and his face, with its uneven features, looked drawn. If it weren't for those watchful eyes he would have looked stupid and lazy. But he wasn't.

He always kept his outdoor clothes on: all the year round the same worn-out leather jacket, the gloves and scarf in a heap on his desk, the same shirt on his back day after day. It all looked careless and casual, as if he had only sat down for a second and would be off again in a moment.

"I don't think he ever has a bath," said Barbara. "And perhaps he never takes those clothes off. He delivers groceries for a supermarket on Saturdays and works as a postman during the Christmas holidays. Odd that he joins in with us at all. It seems a sort of fixation of his."

Christopher lived in one of the blocks of council flats near the station on the same floor as

Stan. It was Stan, too, who sometimes brought him along. Stan was a friendly person. He just shrugged his shoulders if one of them sighed or protested when Christopher suddenly appeared out of nowhere. If you thought about it a little you had to admit that he was harmless. He generally sat there just as quietly as he did in the classroom, keeping his outdoor things on. Then, suddenly, he was off again. Gone.

"Perhaps his father came to fetch him," someone would suggest. With anyone else it could have been a joke. Christopher was nineteen, almost twenty, and he did as he pleased. But his father was all he had. They lived in a two-roomed flat in that enormous block and spent a good deal of time together. His father sometimes fetched him or stood and waited for him in a doorway or at the station. He was governed by the same casualness, the same quality of unexpectedness, as Christopher. He never did his coat up and always had a cigarette between his tight lips. His head was always bare, his cheeks ruddy. He usually had the dog with him, Christopher's big Alsatian. He never said much; no one spoke to him. No one acknowledged Christopher's father. You could no more talk about him than you could about Nicholas's illness. People acted as though they didn't see him. They all felt the same way, and no one could explain why. They were sorry for Christopher. If only you could be a bit more pleasant to him! Christopher was not one to encourage friendly advances.

It wasn't at all easy. Stella preferred to bypass the problems, giving them a wide berth. Christopher's circle was colored red, red like the flames of a fire or the color a sunset can be. A dangerous color. Explosive!

For a while she considered whether she should draw a line across from him to Camilla — Camilla, with her snub nose and platinum hair, forever happy and gay. She always wore very high heels because she was rather short. It would be wrong to say that Christopher was the only one she got on with. It was more a case of being older than the others, already too old for school. That's why she understood him and his special ways. It was she, too, who often sat next to Nicholas and talked to him.

Nicholas. He had to have a circle. There was Nicholas. He was always carted around by Christopher. Nicholas never came without Christopher, but Christopher also came on his own when he felt like it. A joining line had to be drawn between Christopher and Nicholas.

Stella wrote Nicholas in the circle which she colored green. There was no other color left. Anyway, he liked taking walks through the woods, that she knew. He often wore a large green tweed jacket with enormous pockets. A wonderful specimen. Green was Nicholas's color.

Nicholas and Christopher. Both were somehow different from the others, but they had nothing in common, just this quality of being different. Perhaps that's why they often went around to-

gether. Both were older than the others; both had had to repeat a couple of years at school. They didn't truly belong to the class, but didn't really belong to any other group either.

Imagine Nicholas beside you in the warm darkness of the cinema; or settled at your feet by the fire, with records playing in the background; or Nicholas at the edge of a tiny dance floor. It was difficult to picture. Hardly anyone took any notice of him, but presumably he was quite happy anyway. He never said a word. Christopher sometimes made an effort to draw him into the conversation through teasing, little digs and jibes, if nothing else would work.

"What's the matter? Don't you want to join in the dancing, Nicholas? You mustn't be afraid of Stella. She won't bite you . . ."

Christopher only bothered with Nicholas so that he could be unkind and objectionable. Stella was convinced of that. Nicholas didn't seem to take exception to anything. Perhaps he didn't always understand properly. Sometimes he laughed his breathless laugh.

They had all kept together through autumn and winter, but there weren't all that many of them. Together they used to drive to town, to the theater or to dances. On Saturday afternoons they sat in one or other of their homes by an open fire and roasted chestnuts in the embers, or they just sat together doing nothing, edged up close together, always with the record player on in the background. Sometimes a couple danced, but not

often. They were always in the house, with the parents who owned it either out visiting or gone away. Things just turned out that way, and it seemed quite natural, without there being any particular intention behind it, and their parents seemed almost happy with the arrangement. After all, they were almost grown up. Questions, exact accounts of their movements, set times for getting home, were becoming less and less common. They were responsible for their own actions. Those stringent laws for which so many people were crying out should have been introduced years ago if they were to have any effect. You couldn't suddenly come up with them now. As long as they got by with their school work and, generally speaking, didn't annoy anyone, then . . . Decent young people . . . yes, all of them . . .

Their code of behavior was so well set out that, to an outsider, it seemed to work wonderfully well. That splendid brother and sister, Barbara and Paul . . . Always good reports; great interest in sport; their own rooms in that respected household; their parents often abroad. Stan: youngest son, elder brothers and sisters grown up and married long ago; three stories up in the new block of flats near the station; set hours, sensible pocket money; hobby room at his disposal; galoshes; member of the junior sports club committee . . . Madge and Camilla, those two happy sisters; their father a dentist, lots of brothers and sisters, no one knew how many, an indeterminate number. The two girls were al-

ways having to lend a hand and were extremely capable. No wonder it gave other people a bad conscience who had everything in life simply handed to them on a plate . . . Gordon, only son of a big name in industry; tennis court in their own grounds; boat; golf; trips abroad; clean fingernails, and always an engaging smile.

Then there was Stella herself: eldest child of a young, lively family striving conscientiously to do everything respectably and correctly, but seldom succeeding. Modern methods of upbringing as long as all went well, then suddenly chaos. Mother a textile designer, an artist in actual fact; father a psychologist. And as a home for them all an old, heavily mortgaged villa they had recently acquired.

Into this environment had come Christopher and Nicholas, each from a different background, but each, in his own way, representing the unknown and the dangerous. It wasn't possible to feel really at ease and secure when one of them was there. Stella was secretly ashamed of the feeling.

The blue, red, and green circles on the paper glowed like an abstract painting. Barbara gazed thoughtfully at Stella's piece of research which she had entitled: "Diagrammatic representation of the structure of a group of young people in a small town."

Barbara formed the central point, that was quite obvious. Stan and Paul were the bond that held them all together. They made sure that the

group was always doing something — going off to the cinema or a football match, deciding to meet at one of their homes, or sometimes driving out into the fresh air of the countryside.

Barbara reached for a red pencil and drew a line from herself to Stan. Then she drew a second line between Gordon and Stella, making a red arrow.

"That's right, isn't it? You and Gordon? I was convinced yesterday . . ."

Stella pulled herself together. She didn't want to talk about it; she wasn't clear about it herself.

Gordon and Stella? No, that was wrong. There was no one else besides Gordon; there was no one for Stella. It was only when they danced, when it was cozy and warm and the music grew softer and the lights slowly dimmer, when they danced cheek to cheek. It was then that Gordon danced only with Stella and Stella only with Gordon. Was it really only because he was so well groomed, so clean? Because he smelled of good soap, had white teeth? Because he . . . was in love with Stella?

Once more Barbara drew a line with the red pencil, this time from Nicholas to Stella. She thought for a while and then drew a dotted line between Stella and Paul.

"What are you doing?" cried Stella. "You're wrecking my diagram!"

"No, I'm not. I'm only making it clearer. There's more in it than you think. The red arrows show who's in love with you, Stella. It's you who

are the sun, even if it is with the rays going in the other direction. Do you see what I mean?"

Barbara drew another line, a very thick one. It led from Christopher to Stella.

"No, now . . ."

Barbara remained quiet, unruffled and objective as always. Searchingly, she looked at Stella.

"That's the reason," she said. "Don't you see?"

# 3

Cool, calm, and collected, and drawn up to her full height, Brenda came down the stairs like a goddess of fate. Which indeed she was. She was fully aware that she carried a thunderbolt in her hand.

Stella was sitting beside her mother on the settee, explaining something to her with pencil and paper. Brenda looked at her sister with cold, inquiring eyes. She didn't find it particularly amusing having an elder sister, a sister who all too often created general confusion and sometimes even upset everyone simply by being there at exactly the wrong time. The elder girl would, moreover, keep telling her what to do, for Stella had the ludicrous idea that she had to take her mother's place in looking after Brenda if perhaps she ran outside without a coat during the mid-morning break in winter or wanted to take a short-cut across the ice before the thin layer on the surface of the water could even be given that name.

This time it was Brenda's turn. She was

convinced of that. It was so exciting she had butterflies in her stomach. She waited a few moments longer, gleefully relishing what was to happen in a moment. Then, suddenly, the explosion. Brenda's voice could sound harsh and penetrating when she wanted it to.

"Just what did you all get up to at Nicholas's party yesterday? Gabriella said it was dreadful. You all behaved too atrociously for words. You too, Stella."

"Me?"

Stella blushed. She bent her head low over the paper, her hair falling across her cheeks.

"Yes, you. I asked particularly. 'Stella too?' I asked. 'Yes, honestly, especially Stella,' said Gabriella."

Their mother was quite at a loss. She looked anxiously across at Brenda as though she took it all to be a bad joke.

"What on earth are you on about?" muttered Stella. "I don't know what you mean."

Brenda was not to be shaken.

"You mean I don't know what I'm talking about? But I do know what I heard, and Gabriella knows what she saw!"

Gabriella was Nicholas's sister. Gabriella and Brenda were in the same class at school. What could Gabriella have said?

"Stella," began their mother, "you told me it was a marvelous party, a really lovely evening. Nicholas's mother had made such wonderful preparations and the house looked magnificent . . ."

Stella's heart sank. As she looked up at her mother she could feel all her courage ebbing away.

Up till that moment everything was still as it had always been. She had hoped to come to grips with it all, to overcome that inner unease.

"But you said it was so marvelous, a lovely party . . ." her mother said again.

Yes, Stella had described it at length and in great detail.

When she came home from a party she always went and sat at the end of her mother's bed in the dim light of the bedside lamp. Her mother always listened, wide awake and full of interest. Yet she could never picture what really happened at such "parties." She imagined them to be similar to large dinner parties for adults, but merrier, with more noise and not so much to eat and drink. In the main, people sat around a table and talked, the boys asked all the girls to dance in turn, perhaps someone flirted shyly with one of the girls — that was romantic.

So can you then explain what it's really like? That there are no adults there, that they sit close together in pairs, that they seldom dance — and then only with their particular girl- or boyfriend. You just can't describe what goes on. Admittedly, Stella had tried, but then it was better to tell of the other things — of the house, the decorations, the food, and the music.

When Stella had come home on the evening of Nicholas's party — not particularly late — she

found more than usual to talk about, and everything had sounded so enjoyable to her mother. Now she was puzzled.

"It seemed almost a little old-fashioned to me, but very nice. That boy's mother had obviously done all she possibly could to make it a lovely festive evening. I don't understand . . ."

"Perhaps that was it, perhaps that was the mistake," muttered Stella. "She really put herself out. It was all a bit much."

Brenda stood where she was and waited. She found the whole situation quite fascinating. Her mother seemed tired and sad.

"So what exactly did you all get up to? You too. We must get to the bottom of it."

At that moment the younger twins burst into the room in full football gear, oblivious of the freshly polished floor. Something boiled over on the kitchen stove. Her mother had other things to worry about, and Stella hoped she would leave it at that. She, Stella, didn't want to get to the bottom of it at all — not with her mother. It was her own very personal problem, and she had to sort it out for herself.

# 4

It was Christopher who had actually invited them. In his usual sullen way and without looking directly at them he had nodded toward Nicholas's desk and said, "You're all invited to Nicky's place this evening. He's giving a party. You must all come — about eight."

That had been on Thursday after the afternoon break. An odd day for a party, but it was Nicholas's birthday, as they later found out.

Christopher set off earlier by train and met them outside. The others all piled into Gordon's large car. Camilla was not with them as she was on night duty.

It would have been better if they'd sent out invitations — large black writing on glossy, stiff cards — the pleasure of your company — suggested dress — R.S.V.P. As they turned into the graveled drive to the villa and saw all the gay lanterns they knew that everything was going wrong. They were a mixed crowd, all wearing the wrong clothes, in the wrong frame of mind, and arriving at the wrong time.

Christopher was wearing his leather jacket as

always. Stella wondered if he would at least take it off when he went inside . . . Or would he act according to custom? Would he be wearing that old blue shirt with the dirty collar?

Stella herself was wearing a red skirt with a black polo-necked sweater. Her mother had tried to make her wear her blue velvet dress or her new light jersey suit. It would have been ridiculous — that was the sort of thing you wore for visiting relations or going to the theater with your parents. Her mother couldn't understand that black tights, a home-spun skirt, and a polo-necked sweater were always right.

As a slight concession, and to dress it up a bit, Stella added a thin silver chain, long, reaching almost to her waist, and her new patent-leather shoes with bows on. She was slim and elf-like. Her shiny blonde hair fell soft and shimmering to her shoulders in wonderful contrast with the black sweater. Equally dramatic were the opposing elements in Stella's character, the lack of self-consciousness and the innocent provocativeness — in demure black.

The flickering light of the lanterns threw a changing light on their faces, made them look different, full of secrets. With a dull whisper the heavy oak door swung to behind them. Nicholas's sister, wearing a very frilly blouse and with white ribbons on her long plaits, took their coats and hung them on padded hangers. Instantly Stella realized that the blue velvet dress would have been right.

It would have gone with this house.

In actual fact there was nothing special about that evening at Nicholas's house. As children they had been quite used to going to parties like this. When they were younger it was always along these lines: a mother made the young guests welcome, helped them find their places, showed them over the house, and was there like a shadow the whole time. There were sandwiches, tea in large cups, music on the radio or from the record player. The boys stood in a long line along the wall of the large dining room, the girls formed a single giggling shy group. It reminded them of visits to relations. When they were all a few years older these celebrations and their rites would be sure to take on new significance.

Now they were unusual, even rare. They still called their celebrations parties, but it was impossible to describe them. The spontaneity with which they were thought up matched the unpredictability of the course they took. Nicholas's party, however, was just as Stella's mother imagined a party for young people would be. At least, it started off that way. You could tell her about that part. Heavy red warmth enveloped them as they entered the hall. Dark-red velvet drapes hanging in soft folds, oriental carpets, tall mirrors, crystal chandeliers with shimmering prisms, dull silk covers on the cushioned chairs, a fat dachshund with a shiny coat lying on a soft cushion in a basket. Doors led off to secret rooms that lay in mystical half-

light; family portraits looked down at them in long rows from the walls: straight-backed women with rosy cheeks and eyes fixed, their soft hands folded modestly in their laps; men with thick beards, splendidly gleaming medals on dark uniforms.

Nicholas's father had been dead for a good many years. He had held a post in the Foreign Office and was getting on in years when Nicholas was born. Stella's mother had looked all this up in *Who was Who* when she had heard about the invitation, but Stella had paid no more attention to the discovery that had so surprised her mother. Now she had to think about it, now that it had all become real.

Nicholas's mother was no longer young. As a widow she did not live extravagantly, but the father's dominating influence could still be felt. Her main aim in life was to cultivate tradition, to keep it worthy of respect and hand it down to the next generation.

Stella was depressed. She felt extremely rebellious without quite knowing why. It all seemed rather dismal, although Stella knew how very much her mother would have approved of the refined setting. Stella couldn't tell her enough about all that after the party. Everything had to be described in great detail. Her mother was happy to know that her daughter was mixing in such circles. Odd to think that Nicholas was a part of those "circles."

"I'd go mad with pictures like that staring

down at me on all sides," she whispered to Barbara. "Thank heavens I haven't any ancestors, not a single one."

"Everyone has ancestors," answered Barbara softly. "Or do you imagine you sprang straight from Adam's rib?"

Even today there were people who had their portraits painted, and after a few generations these pictures would look down from the walls, all somber and awe-inspiring to a greater or lesser degree — and they would be ancestral portraits. However blue and cubic their style might be now, they would still look dull and old-fashioned in due course.

As they came out of the warm half-light of the hall they saw Nicholas and his mother standing beneath the crystal chandelier in the drawing room. Behind them, in the dining room, was the long table, ready laid: yard upon yard of shimmering white tablecloth, glass, silver, candles, and, on every plate, a white table napkin folded into the shape of a water lily.

Christopher turned on his heels and went back out into the hall. He dusted his shoes over once more and quickly dragged a comb through his hair. Then he took a deep breath, although he did have the advantage of being the only one who had been there before. None of the others had even given a thought to what Nicholas's home would be like. None of them had been interested — not even faintly curious. Now they were all caught off their guard. They were all amazed,

and uncertainty spread from one to the other. To overcome it they all talked unnecessarily loudly, laughed unusually noisily.

Nicholas's mother shook hands with them all in turn and had a friendly word for each of them. Nothing in her face betrayed surprise or disappointment at the multi-colored everyday clothes of her guests.

Nicholas was wearing a dark suit. His large face was red, his handshake limp and damp. He snuffled and tried hard to be particularly welcoming. "I'm pleased you could come, Stella!" It sounded as though he had learned his lines off by heart.

His mother had an angular face, with high cheekbones and a determined chin. She was dark and looked stern and wore her hair combed back from her face, so smooth and shiny that it looked almost painted on her head.

"So you are Stella! Nicholas has told me so much about you. I'm so pleased to meet you, my dear."

A hand hard as wood; a hard voice; searching eyes. Stella felt about six years old. It was like meeting her teacher for the first time at school. Her hair fell across her cheeks, and she tossed it back with a quick movement of her head, trying to smile. Gordon was right behind her, wearing a striped sports jacket and gray trousers. He was quite at ease and acting normally. Stella took a step to one side and ended up standing close to his elbow. Nicholas's mother had heard

so much about her! The very thought of it made her feel cross. It seemed like a threat.

She was overcome with a very strong desire to grasp Gordon's hand, to feel its dry warmth for a moment. Just that tiny movement would restore her equilibrium.

How silly, how childish, how senseless!

Nicholas took Stella in to supper. He bowed clumsily with exaggerated politeness and held his crooked arm way out from his body for Stella's delicate little hand. Then they proceeded across the endless expanse of drawing-room carpet into the dimly lit, festive-looking dining room.

The candles burned silently. Their yellowish flames danced restlessly for a moment whenever there was any movement, as when the guests drew back their chairs, and then stood erect once more like soldiers at their posts. At the windows' thick gold curtains hung in heavy folds from ceiling to floor. The lofty sky and fresh air seemed shut out for eternity.

Nicholas's mother sat with them at the table. Any other arrangement would have been unthinkable. She nodded encouragement to Nicholas across the low flower arrangements in the center. Christopher sat on her left, wearing a white shirt and striped tie. He had actually left his leather jacket in the hall, and looked unusually clean. He was the only self-possessed one among them, and had shown no surprise at all. Gordon was sitting next to Gabriella, Nicholas's thirteen-year-

old sister. She sat looking just as strict as her mother, bolt upright like a candle flame, her elbows tucked in close to her sides. Her cold gaze sped contemptuously over the guests seated at the table.

She was like Brenda. Stella wondered whether all thirteen-year-olds were just as unapproachable and calculating and what she must have been like at that age. She didn't remember any more, it was much too long ago. They could be so stiff and formal, these thirteen-year-olds. Then, suddenly, the façade was gone, they thought up the most incredible stories, and giggled over everything and nothing.

Gordon and Christopher were the only two who seemed at home. But then Christopher was Nicholas's friend, perhaps his only friend, and he knew his mother. Gordon, on the other hand, was more polished and often in company. He was almost unbearably well-behaved and charming.

Nicholas himself lacked all the social graces. He dirtied the tablecloth, dropped his knife on the floor, and was so excited and nervous he could hardly sit still.

Madge giggled incessantly. She whispered behind her napkin to her neighbor that it reminded her of a comic opera.

Their hostess took a great interest in all of them, overlooking no one and speaking to all the young people in turn. She thought Stella's silver chain was beautiful. It must be very old. Perhaps

it was a piece of Russian craftsmanship. Had Stella inherited the chain?

"From my grandmother," Stella answered quickly.

Then Nicholas's mother talked at length about Russian silver and handicrafts. She told them of the significance of the samovar. On a low table between the two long windows in the dining room a samovar gleamed with a dull, secret glow.

"What, actually, is an icon?" asked Madge, genuinely interested.

"An icon is a small painting or statue, or often an altar piece. It usually depicts the Virgin and child. Upstairs, in the library, there's a very beautiful icon you can have a look at later."

"Super!" exclaimed Madge. It was not one of her better days. Her hair was a mess. She looked across to Paul for help, but he didn't seem to notice.

A maid moved around silently offering dishes. There was a kind of cheese dish with mushrooms and shrimps, and white wine with it. Nicholas knocked a full glass of it over Stella's skirt.

"Doesn't matter," Stella comforted him magnanimously. "It's only an old skirt . . ."

Like the others, Stella drank two glasses of wine. Christopher was the only one who didn't drink anything. He never drank, and had promised to drive the big car back afterwards.

It was Nicholas's birthday — but no one had remembered it. Not even Stan, conscientious Stan, had reminded the others this time.

"But we didn't know when it was, and we've only just had the invitation," was his excuse.

Nicholas's mother was very surprised. That evening every single one of them must have let slip some sort of indiscreet or unfortunate remark, Stella thought later. Suddenly she realized that preparations for this party had been going on for some time.

The family had, in fact, been talking about it since Christmas, and for more than a week his mother had been asking him to invite his friends. Nicholas was bound to have snuffled and muttered in his usual way and let them believe all was in order. He still hadn't dared invite them himself. Perhaps he was afraid they would refuse or make excuses. So Christopher had had to come to the rescue at the last minute. The party table was already laid and mother and daughter had already dressed for the evening when Christopher had made his surprising announcement to the class. "Come round to Nicholas's place, all of you. He's giving a party."

Now they were all there. If only they'd at least brought him a box of chocolates! They generally gave each other records on their birthdays. They scraped all the money together in a kitty, and then it often stretched to a long-player. Stella had been given a Sammy Davis record on her seventeenth birthday. Christopher tapped his glass, got to his feet, and to everyone's surprise made a speech to Nicholas. He felt that his friend was one of the mainstays of the class, and that

he, Christopher, was the other. There were only the two of them — one in each corner — but that was enough, when they were of their caliber. The two of them were the eldest and most experienced of the lot. If you totted up their years of experience in "school matters" it wasn't far off thirty. Wasn't that impressive, awe-inspiring, even?

It was an amusing speech. Christopher could do it when he felt like it. The only snag was that he seldom did. It wasn't until that evening that Stella fully realized it. Paul laughed so much that the tears ran down his cheeks, and Madge giggled continually behind her napkin.

Then Christopher leaned across the table and grasped the flowers in the silver goblet in the center. Water dripped onto the fine tablecloth and candle flames sizzled as he presented the flowers to Nicholas, the birthday boy, with an extravagant flourish. Nicholas stumbled to his feet, knocking his chair over in the process, thanked him, bowed, and then bowed again.

Then they all sang *For he's a jolly good fellow*, and finished with three cheers. They drank a toast and, as the glasses touched, the room was full of festive atmosphere. Nicholas clapped his hands and looked as happy as a child on Christmas Day.

"Now I'll leave you young people to yourselves," said Nicholas's mother brightly, looking at them all encouragingly. They stood in the drawing room looking a little lost. A little un-

steady too, perhaps, after the wine and the food, and the stupefying warmth of the dining room.

They had just thanked their hostess in turn for the lovely meal. Now they felt lost, almost abandoned, as both mother and sister went out. Nicholas stuck both his great hands in his jacket pockets and stood there rocking to and fro on his heels as though he didn't know what to do. What form did his evenings usually take? wondered Stella. What did he do when he'd done his prep. and supper was over? He never went out, he had no friends besides Christopher . . .

Now they could hear the chairs and tables being pushed across the parquet floor and the carpets being rolled up in the dining room. Stella looked around. Barbara was hanging on Stan's arm, looking sleepy. Madge was leaning right across a chest of drawers laden with small silver objects so that she could get right up to the mirror hanging over it. She painted a large mouth on her pale face, and then drew back her lips to check that there was no red on her teeth. Paul was looking at a curved ornamental dagger he had taken from a little table. There was so much here to pick up and look at. Christopher asked if he might smoke, his pipe already in his hand. Gordon was standing to one side, waiting, courteous and charming as ever.

It was only just after nine. Stella wondered when they might reasonably go home. There were only three girls, so dancing was out of the ques-

tion. Nicholas told them about a film he had been to see recently. Did Stella know it? The new one starring Audrey Hepburn? No? Pity, it was a good film.

Music drifted across from the dining room. A wornout, tinny record of *I'm in heaven . . .* blared out over an amplifier. The double doors were opened, and the music was suddenly quite near.

"Now, you young ones, come along. Now you can dance." The large dining room seemed barren and empty, the ceiling light glared down on the parquet and spotlighted a bare yellow circle. The rest of the room lay in half darkness. It was a Fred Astaire record, an ancient thing, long forgotten and grossly overrated.

"I've got some records with me," said Gordon, and disappeared. He always kept a great pile of them in the car.

"May I have the pleasure?"

Nicholas bowed and took Stella's hand in his. She felt his fingers closing more and more tightly over hers. "How small your hand is!" he said suddenly, bellowing it out so that the others could hear. Whenever there was something that ought to be spoken softly, whispered almost, it often seemed as if Nicholas had plugged in to the wrong socket, for he almost shouted it.

You just had to take no notice — it was all connected with his bad hearing . . . But Stella still had a terrible feeling of panic. Moreover, she noticed his mother in the hall doorway. She

obviously couldn't bear to miss seeing her son dancing with Stella, Stella, about whom she had heard so much . . .

It was all like a trap.

Stella had never danced with Nicholas before, and presumably no other girls had either. She didn't even know that he could dance. He put his arm rigidly around her waist and lifted her right hand high in the air: the correct starting position. One, two, three, four . . . The record player blasted out the music, for Nicholas had to be able to hear it.

"I went to dancing classes this winter, and we often danced to this record. It's got a good beat, don't you think? One, two, three, four. I learned the waltz, too."

Stella didn't want to make it even more difficult for him. She acted as if he really could dance, as if he had actually learned something at those dancing classes, as if he had mastered the art completely. He stamped on, hopping on every beat.

"It really is an excellent dancing school," he went on. "They teach you an awful lot."

What a crazy idea! she thought to herself. Fancy sending Nicholas to a dancing school! It was so pointless! It would have been better and much kinder to him to have left him in peace.

"Being able to dance is part of one's general education. Mother says it's absolutely imperative."

His mother was standing in the doorway, half hidden by the heavy curtains. She seemed per-

fectly satisfied with her son's prowess on the dance floor.

At the end of the record Nicholas cried, "Don't run away, Stella! Come on, we'll put on another record. I can do the waltz, too." He drew her over to the record player and began showing her the record sleeves, but she said no, not this one; nor that one.

"Then come upstairs with me and look at my photos. They're sure to interest you," he cried suddenly, grasping her arm. "I've got several hundred."

Gordon came bursting into the room, his arms full of records. He got busy with the record player straight away.

"Now you'll hear something! Come on, Stella, let's dance."

It sounded quite different already. Nicholas certainly hadn't heard tunes like that at dancing class. He suddenly looked quite helpless, quite lost, and had his usual school expression on his face. Christopher and Madge were already on the floor and were twisting in the circle of light in the center. There was no holding Barbara and Stan, either — they bent low, twisting and turning and shuffling their feet to the beat. Gordon drew Stella toward him, his hands lying warm and still on her back. She could feel his chin on the top of her head, and she relaxed.

It gave her a feeling of security. Stella had felt threatened in a way she couldn't explain, and now a chance happening offered her protection.

# 5

Stella was childish. Stella was stuck up. Stella was critical and cold. That little saint, *Stella polaris*, the North star. That was the sort of thing they said about Stella, those were the conclusions they came to, all those who thought they knew her, and the others who didn't know her at all. But they were all agreed — Stella always evaded the issue. You never knew where you stood with her. She kept her distance. She was gay, good-natured, and fun to be with, but hard and uncaring too. It was inevitable for people to think she was Gordon's girlfriend, for the two of them always turned up together in his car and he always drove her home. But it wasn't like that: Gordon knew it, and everyone else did too. Stella belonged to no one.

Barbara belonged to Stan. There was no secret about that. They went off together whenever they had the opportunity. Barbara saw nothing in it. She even said so straight out. At that particular moment she was firmly convinced that the two

of them would stay together a long time; perhaps they would even marry some day.

Madge took up with whoever came along, and at the moment she was going out with Paul. The only thing she cared about was never to be left out of anything. She was afraid of not being allowed to join in. Perhaps she'd never been allowed to join in other children's games when she was young, and that was why.

Stella never took up with whoever came along, nor did she ever get involved. She felt free and independent. She was above such things. Really, it was because, through doing that, she felt safe: she also felt there was no hurry.

Stella was seventeen, and it was exactly that reserved manner of hers that men found exciting. At times she was sure that they would all wait for her and look after her. At other times she thought it was a mistake not to be in love. The others were — all the time.

On that Thursday of Nicholas's party Stella felt threatened. To her the warm, ornately decorated house was like a trap. She felt locked in; but how or why she just couldn't explain.

After Stella and Gordon had danced for a while they set out to look for the icon that had been mentioned during supper. Hand in hand they wandered through a series of rooms shrouded in mystery, but without success. They went up a wide staircase and suddenly found themselves enfolded in absolute quiet. This house was almost

completely without noise: every sound, every movement, was deadened by the rich folds of the curtains and drapes and by the thick carpets. An unreal, threatening silence.

The library was on the first floor at the far end of the wide landing. Bookcases, lining every wall of that huge room, reached to the ceiling, and double glass doors led up to a gallery. In a corner stood a rather worn leather sofa, and beside it, on a low table, was a lamp with a pearl-fringed shade. There was also a little pair of folding steps for reaching the top shelves. Here, too, it was quiet, warm, and suffocatingly grand. But the sky was visible through the shiny window-panes, so that you didn't feel quite as shut in as you did in the rooms downstairs.

Stella wandered about for a while looking at the books, trailing her hand along their leather spines, catching glimpses of titles here and there. *History of the Ancient World. The Tomb of Tutankhamen. Suecia antiqua et hodierna.* So many heavy, learned volumes. Did Nicholas ever read them?

"Whenever I've been invited to a friend's house my father always asks if they had a lot of books. When I was younger I didn't pay any attention, but later I actually took the trouble to answer his question as best I could. And now it's important to me, too; you judge a family by their books."

Gordon laughed. "At our house all they ask is

what we had to eat. Father always wants to know whether we had anything to drink — and, most important, *what*!"

"So we'll both be able to answer our parents' questions today," replied Stella, laughingly.

She stopped in front of a large, somber painting. It was of a ship in distress, wind-lashed waves, steep cliffs. She stood there a long time. She was always fascinated by anything melancholy or dramatic like that shipwreck. Beneath the painting stood a faded globe, almost colorless by now, but larger than any she had ever seen. She turned it, making the earth spin slowly on its axis. Stella never ceased to be amazed that the earth itself was spinning just as constantly.

"When I was little I used to wish for a life-sized globe, and every birthday I was disappointed . . ."

Gordon put his arm around her shoulders, looking down at her and smiling. He was so tall and taciturn. At that particular moment Stella found it comforting to be near him. She was tired and her head felt a little muzzy.

"Nicholas wanted me to see his photographs. Did you know about his hobby — about his love of photography, I mean?"

Gordon shook his head. He knew nothing about Nicholas: none of them did. All he knew about him now was that the house he lived in was richly furnished and sumptuously decorated. Who would have thought it?

"He wanted to show me his room, too — but

I didn't want to see it. Was that nasty of me? Do you think I was being mean?"

Gordon didn't answer. Perhaps he wasn't even really listening. He led her across to the old leather sofa. She sat down beside him, tucked her feet up beneath her, and leaned her head on his shoulder. The icon was forgotten. They sat there a long time, not moving, not speaking. Gordon was never very talkative, and it was generally Stella who did all the talking, for she usually had something to say. They could hear the faint sound of music in the distance. Stella yawned. She was really tired and was longing to go home.

"Does wine make you sleepy?"

She didn't know: she had very seldom drunk wine before and then only in very small quantities. She wanted to go home, but at the same time she found it rather pleasant to be sitting there, quite still, with Gordon's arm around her shoulders. She could have stayed there for ages. Once she looked up at him and smiled, but it was really nothing more than a slight movement of the mouth.

Gordon was a considerate and shy young man, so shy that he almost did himself a disservice. He had been fond of Stella for a long time, but he'd never been pushing or annoying. Stella didn't want them to be like Barbara and Stan — and he respected that.

Now he quickly bent down to her and kissed her. Was it really happening? He couldn't be-

lieve it. Stella was sitting there beside him, so small and still, and letting him kiss her. She didn't push him away, she didn't come out with any sarcastic comments or detached remarks about the time or the weather. She just shrank into herself even more, soft as a tiny kitten.

It was confusing — and wonderful. And so many words, so many tender words, sprang to Gordon's lips — but he spoke not a single one of them. Instead he just kissed her over and over again. It was overwhelming. Surely it was better to stay silent and not say one word that might sound false or upset this marvelous feeling of harmony?

Someone called out from the bottom of the stairs: "Gordon! Stella!"

Stella looked up at him and laughed softly, putting her finger to her lips to stop him speaking. He leaned forward and made to put out the little lamp with the pearl fringe on the table beside them, but Stella caught his hand and kept tight hold of it.

"It would look very suspicious if we were found sitting here in the dark," she whispered.

But she still stayed where she was, and they both lost count of how long they had been sitting there.

"Now I've kissed you for the first time," he murmured, his lips touching her hair.

What he had really been about to say was "you've let me kiss you," but he decided it would have sounded silly. Whether she had allowed him

to or not was no longer relevant. She was glowing with warmth and happiness, and for a moment she imagined she was in love with Gordon. It would have been wonderful.

Admittedly, it hadn't happened as she had always dreamed it would. It had happened so quietly, almost by chance. She'd imagined it had to be accompanied by thumping hearts, burning hands, and with the sound of music in her ears. The whole star-laden sky had to come tumbling down and time had to stand still. She had always imagined it in the open air, very romantic, on a balcony or a bridge, in a boat with the wind in her hair. It hadn't been anywhere near as spectacular. She had allowed herself to be persuaded into feeling so relaxed — it had come over her like a dulling of the senses, as if her usually over-lively mind had been lulled to sleep. Perhaps the wine had had something to do with it, or this strange house where so many things seemed unreal, where time and space were suspended.

Suddenly Christopher was standing before them. Perhaps he'd been there a long time, for they hadn't heard him come in. This house was so empty of noises. He was angry. Absolutely furious.

"So here you are," he hissed. "Do you realize you've been away two whole hours? We've got to go home now."

Stella leapt to her feet. She brushed her hair out of her face and groped for her silver chain

as if for something to hold on to. She was hurled right back into reality.

It was after a quarter past eleven, and they were still there at Nicholas's home where they had been guests at a formal and dignified birthday party. Her immediate reaction was to try to make light of it all. The others surely couldn't have got around to missing Gordon and herself. But no, that was hardly likely, as there were only three girls there. Any one of them would have been missed if she'd left the room for any length of time. Two hours. They had only sat down for a moment to have a quiet chat. No, they hadn't chatted at all — they'd hardly said a word! Didn't everyone else do the same? Wasn't it the natural, the accepted thing to do? . . .

Not for Stella. Stella had never behaved like that at a party before.

How were they to explain themselves? Stella tried, but she didn't get anywhere with Christopher.

"We only sat there and talked. There's nothing to get so het up about."

"Talked!" Christopher repeated with a disdainful snort. "Nicholas put his head around the door not very long ago, but he was much too discreet. He didn't want to disturb you."

"Really?" muttered Gordon. He was quite self-possessed, carefully stretching his long legs and slowly getting to his feet.

Stella's courage failed her. Suddenly she was irritated by Gordon's attitude.

"Where are the others?" he asked, laying a hand on Stella's shoulder with a protective gesture. He was perfectly calm.

"Where are the others? What on earth do you mean by that?"

If Stella had only been her usual cool and lucid self she would have known the answer to her own question immediately. Of course, the other two "couples," Barbara and Stan, Madge and Paul, would have made themselves scarce after the dancing, too. They also would have set off on a tour of exploration through the large, quiet house. They too would have disappeared off the face of the earth.

"Oh!" gasped Stella, her eyes wide with fear.

Suddenly she could see it all quite clearly. Christopher and Nicholas all on their own downstairs in the brightly lit drawing room, painfully trying to keep up an appearance of "gay party atmosphere" in front of a mother and sister who kept looking in and offering sweets and refreshments. It must have looked very odd indeed.

"We must unearth the others," said Gordon firmly. He had pulled himself together and returned to his old charming self.

It would be just like searching a jungle, thought Stella. All those rooms with their curtains, tall cupboards, and large sofas, that labyrinth full of hidden traps. Hadn't she been right about it from the start, right about that feeling of being ensnared as the heavy front door had swung to behind them? She felt as if she were entangled

in trailing creepers, in soft green juicy exotic plants, the sort that caught insects alive.

In silence they descended the huge staircase, Christopher and Stella side by side, Gordon a few steps behind.

"And you, of all people, Stella! I'd have expected a bit more tact from you. It just shows how mistaken one can be."

Stella wanted to spring to her own defense and answer, but she managed to stop herself. She understood Christopher and knew full well there was no point in making excuses. Never before had she cared what Christopher might think of her. But now, suddenly, it was important, and she desperately wished to win his approval. Soon they were all standing together down in the hall, a tiny group, huddled together and trying to act naturally. Madge's hair was more untidy than ever, and Barbara kept blinking in the bright light. The men had their hands in their pockets. You could see they were ashamed of themselves and that they were also annoyed. Nicholas grinned, his huge hands dangling at his sides.

"Nice of you all to come," he said, and snuffled. They all took their leave, many thanks, it was great and goodnight. Gordon's excellent good manners came to the fore even in this situation:

"Your mother — shouldn't we say good-bye to her too?"

"She's already gone up," said Nicholas. "Shall I fetch her?"

"No, please don't bother," Barbara intervened hurriedly. "But give her our best wishes and thank her for us. It was a lovely party."

She's had enough of us, thought Stella. She doesn't want to set eyes on us again. It hurt a bit. For a moment she found it difficult to stay on her feet. She felt sick.

The fresh air cut into their faces like crystal. All the stars could be picked out clearly, and their breath hung like a thin veil in the air. A winter without snow, with just a thin, crisp film over the earth.

The car was cold. Christopher started up the engine as they all climbed in.

"We must send some flowers," said Barbara. "We must send a lovely bunch of flowers to say thank you."

Madge suddenly burst out laughing. "She must have thought we were very peculiar."

"Yes, we'll send some flowers," Gordon seconded Barbara's suggestion.

As if that would put everything right! As if it could all be wiped out by a bunch of flowers!

Stella bent forward and leaned her cheek against the cold misted glass of the side window. It was gone: that stupefied, sleepy feeling she had had in the library had disappeared. She was indifferent toward Gordon. He seemed a stranger to her. She just didn't know what had come over her.

"How do you feel, Stella?" asked Christopher

from his place behind the steering wheel. He whipped his head around to look at her. Perhaps he was laughing. "Little stuck-up Stella."

It was cold and draughty. She could feel the icy air cutting across the back of her neck and finding its way under her coat collar. She noticed she had forgotten her scarf.

It was a green scarf, long and broad and warm. Her mother had made it herself and given it to her daughter for Christmas. Was that a good enough reason to ask Christopher to go back? She couldn't bring herself to do it.

Nicholas, alone in the quiet house, noticed Stella's scarf immediately as it hung in the now empty clothes cupboard. He took it carefully from the peg and stroked it. It was light as air.

# 6

It came to Stella out of the blue: Nicholas was the donkey prince.

Many years ago when she had first learned to read, Stella had been given a copy of Grimm's fairy tales for Christmas. It was in two thick volumes bound in brown. The text was in large, easy-to-read type and printed on stiff white paper, the pages decorated with garlands of flowers. There wasn't room for much on each page, but it had been just right for Stella at the time. There were a lot of pictures in those books of fairy tales — dark pen-and-ink drawings. In dense, mysterious woods a tree root suddenly sprang to life, reaching with claw-like fingers toward Hansel and Gretel running through the woods at night. The whole world was turned into a whirling snowstorm as Mother Holle shook her feather-bed out of the window high in the tower. The little fisherman stood eternally alone on the deserted seashore shouting out his wishes across the raging sea for the giant fish to hear.

Then the little donkey, the donkey prince. There was an illustration of that story, too: the

sad little donkey sitting with the queen on a dainty balcony of their large castle.

Stella hadn't been able to forget that story about the donkey prince for ages; it had torn a great rift in the protective world of her childhood.

In a far distant land there lived a king and queen who had long wished for a son. They were good and wise and rich and had everything their hearts desired — everything, that is, except a son and heir. As the queen grew older and older, so her wish grew more desperate. Then, at last, she was to have an heir. The prospective parents, the Court and all their subjects looked forward to the event with joy and happy expectation.

When her time came the aging queen bore a donkey.

It was unheard-of. Stella was horrified. She just couldn't get over it. She could picture it all quite clearly. She took it quite literally, and for her it was absolutely real. She was filled with an indescribable horror that did not fade. She could not talk about it to anyone. That feeling of being protected was lost once and for all. To her mind, in a world where a donkey can be born to people instead of a desperately longed-for son, everything was possible. In a world like that a feeling of being protected could only be wishful thinking, just something invented by grown-ups to whisper to us when they tuck us in at night.

But the fairy tale about the donkey prince is not a nasty story at all. It tells how the little

donkey, acclaimed once and for all as a prince, becomes the most lovable, clever, and considerate of all donkeys to the comfort and joy of his parents in their old age. Stella wasn't interested in that part of the story. She had not understood what it meant and found it all very strange. How could anyone be pleased to have a donkey when they had longed for a son, a little prince?

Now, many years later, that old half-forgotten fairy tale sprang to mind again in sharp perspective. This time it was different: she saw it with new eyes; she understood its meaning now. It was a revelation for Stella. The fairy-tale figure had become flesh and blood.

Nicholas was the donkey prince, the eagerly awaited child, and he was the pride and joy of his family. His aging mother and his younger sister with her long plaits — they didn't think Nicholas was ugly or repulsive, they didn't notice his strange walk or the fact that he was deaf, that his voice was much too loud and stuttering, and that he wheezed when he laughed. They saw him quite differently: for them he was the fairy-tale prince, the good, clever young man who was always ready to be helpful.

Nicholas had become the pride and joy of his mother and sister. Stella had realized it after that evening in the strangely silent villa with all those drapes, those family portraits, and that expensive furniture. The fairy tale about the little donkey was no longer horrifying. Stella had discovered its meaning.

# 7

It was easier on the phone because he couldn't get so close. His voice was more bearable too. Stella found it easier to be friendly and chat to him.

"Thanks for the other night," she said again. She really wanted to add " — and forgive me — " but she couldn't. It was too difficult. Explain? What was there to explain?

"You must come another time and see my photos. We never got around to it . . ."

"Thanks, I'd like to . . ."

"Another thing — you forgot your scarf. I've got it here. If you like I could bring it around now."

"No, thanks, it's really not important, Nicholas." Stella bit her lip. She didn't want him here; she had no time for him.

She wanted to go up to the clubhouse with Barbara and help get it ready for the party. It was going to be that evening, put on by the girls' sports club.

"And anyway, I was just about to pop out to

the library to see if I can find anything on Mark Twain. I'm supposed to be writing a paper on him."

"You've already done one on him once."

Fancy his remembering!

"Yes, a long time ago. I want to use that one as a starting point; that's the easiest way. *Huckleberry Finn* was my favorite book at the time — and it still is now."

"If I'm in your direction I can drop the scarf around in any case."

Stella sighed. He was so stubborn. She drew geometric shapes on the telephone block. They grew into a flight of stairs that gradually got steeper and narrower; then a carpet appeared on the stairs and a striped pattern on the carpet.

"You really needn't bother. I've got other scarves — really. I don't need that one."

"Then I'll come tomorrow. If you're free we could go for a walk. After all, it's Sunday tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? No, I'm afraid not. I've got to swot. And we're having visitors too . . . Bring it to school with you."

In half an hour she was supposed to be meeting Barbara at the supermarket, and Gordon was sure to be there, too, with his large car. She really was in a hurry. She had to buy Coca-Cola and coffee, bread, butter, and cheese. She already had balloons and streamers and funny posters for the walls.

Nicholas didn't know about the party. No one

had thought of asking him, as he so seldom joined in anything. Stella didn't feel obliged to tell him now, either. She couldn't go into it now.

"Perhaps I'll drop by after all . . ."

Tomorrow they had to clear up the hut. Parties were always like that. First preparations, organizing everything, putting up decorations. Then for a few hours there would be noise, atmosphere, music, and refreshments. Dancing, games, sleeping. Afterwards they had to clear up, put everything away tidily, wash up, and burn the rubbish.

Stella added a banister to her staircase. She wanted to put an end to this conversation at long last. There'd been enough nattering about that old scarf.

Then she said it: "Keep it. I don't need it. You can have it as my birthday present to you."

The banisters in her drawing were given knobs on top. She tried to imagine Nicholas wearing her green scarf. She could picture him coming up the steps into the crowded smoky room. She could see how he would stop in the doorway, rocking on his heels, her green scarf around his neck the whole time. They'd all notice it, and he'd shout it out right across the room, so that no one could possibly miss it: "Stella gave it to me for my birthday."

How idiotic it all was!

It was the very first time he had rung her up, but she found it aggravating. Just the thought that he had looked up her number and dialed it.

"Why were you so unfriendly?" her mother asked. She had overheard every word.

Nicholas's loud voice was catching, and she automatically shouted back over the phone.

"Why didn't you invite him to tea? It was kind of him to ring — all things considered."

Stella's mother stubbornly refused to discuss the events of that evening as something that had actually happened. Stella didn't want to talk about it at all. She looked out of the window. Everything was gray. This winter without snow was unnatural and depressing. The ground seemed ill without its warming blanket. Motorists were the only people who were pleased about the weather.

"He wanted to take me for a walk."

"You should have invited him around here. I'd like to meet him." It was only because of his name, his house, his family. Her mother wanted to become acquainted with all that through him.

"You've never seen him, Mum. If you had, you wouldn't talk like that. I can't stand him, do you hear? Anyway, we've got that party in the clubhouse today. It was arranged ages ago."

There would be so many of them. It would be crowded, hot, and chaotic. Gordon would be there — that went without saying. Stella didn't know whether she was looking forward to seeing him again.

It was ten o'clock on Saturday morning. Stella really did have a lot to do. Nicholas's phone call had put her behind. The next time the phone

rang it was after three. Stella was back from shopping and was making tea in the kitchen with Barbara. They had put themselves to a great deal of trouble with the preparations. They felt responsible for the whole party and wanted the evening to go off without a hitch.

"Stan's looking after the record player. Have you noticed there's something wrong with the socket by the window? We tried to ring Johnson, the electrician, but he was closed. Now Stan will have to ask Christopher to help."

"Christopher?"

"Well, you know how handy he is. Stan says he doesn't know anyone else who's such a jack-of-all-trades."

Clearly you couldn't keep this kind of party quiet, nor did they want to. Neither, though, did they go running around broadcasting the fact that the girls' sports club was having a party in the clubhouse. It would still be packed out. And as far as Stella knew, Christopher hadn't been invited.

"Camilla isn't coming, either."

Perhaps now he would turn up after all, perhaps a bit later on. His dark eyes would follow Stella as she danced.

"Actually, I don't really feel like going. I'm just not in the mood for it."

Then the phone rang. Someone for Stella.

"Hello. Yes. Stella speaking. Oh — good afternoon. And thank you very much for such a lovely evening. Nicholas? No, he hasn't been here. Is

that what he said? — Yes, he rang this morning, but I wasn't free. — No, I've no idea where he could be. — Yes, thank you very much. — Yes, of course I will. Good-bye."

Stella was quite red in the face. Barbara snatched a charred piece of toast from the toaster.

"Throw it out for the birds," said Stella. "Is it really all that difficult to make toast?"

The air was thick and gray outside, but it would be light for a few more hours yet.

"It was Nicholas's mother asking if he was here. Imagine, Barbara. *Here!*"

Stella pulled herself together. All of a sudden Nicholas was hemming her in on all sides; and only yesterday he had hardly existed. She wasn't going to let it get the better of her. She intended to put Nicholas out of her mind. They went up to her room where she placed a record on the record player, climbed onto the divan, and tucked up her feet beneath her.

"Mother almost had a fit," she said as she filled the large blue cups with tea. "Gabriella told Brenda all about it, and Brenda passed on every single detail . . ."

Barbara wasn't bothered. She didn't take it all that seriously.

"It wasn't that awful. Forget it. You can't wander around thinking about it for days on end. Nicholas doesn't seem to find it all that tragic, either. If he was hurt about it we wouldn't have heard anything from him."

Perhaps, though, it had dawned on him that you didn't have to treat Stella with any great deference any more. Perhaps she, the unattainable, had fallen from her pedestal? Anyway, she couldn't think about it any more. She was going to sew the lining into her striped sailor top because she wanted to wear it that evening with her red trousers. Then she would wash her hair and look out her records.

"Paper napkins," she remembered. "Don't forget the paper napkins. And a couple of kitchen towels. And cushions so that we can sit on the floor by the fire."

Barbara wrote it all down.

The day was still cloudy and dull. A wind sprang up and bowed the skeleton branches silhouetted against the gray sky. Stella kept her eyes on the clock. For some inexplicable reason she still felt ill at ease. She could hardly bear the thought of the evening's festivities.

Barbara, on the other hand, was full of high spirits, and kept making suggestions and having new ideas. We must have this too, and that; we must ring him up and fetch that, and torches and lanterns and pine branches and candles. She wrote it all down on her list.

A strong gust of wind hit the window. Stella wished it would whisk that list right out of the window, and Barbara with it, high up over the roofs. She crept up farther into the corner of the divan and made herself comfortable among the

cushions. She wanted to sit there and be left in peace, to be allowed to sit undisturbed for hours on end and think of nothing at all. But she felt freezing, as if she were standing outside in the biting wind.

"It's strange. About Nicholas, I mean. If he hadn't . . ."

"Are you still thinking about him?" asked Barbara in surprise. "I don't see why you bother."

The phone rang again. Stella took a deep breath, as if she were about to plunge under water. She was beginning to hate that telephone. When she said hello she heard an anxious voice on the other end.

"Oh no. It's not in the least inconvenient."

She pulled a face and glanced at Barbara.

"Christopher," she whispered, and then louder, "Yes, his mother rang earlier. I've no idea where he could be. — But as I told her, we hadn't arranged anything. He must have dreamt it. — What do you mean? — How should I know where he went? It's not my fault his mother said he was meeting me. — He'll turn up. It's only four o'clock and still quite light. His mother's worried, did you say? — What do you mean by that? Do I think we should go and look for him? Is there any point? Where would we start looking? — No, I'm afraid I haven't got a moment, nor's Barbara. I'm afraid we can't do anything. Oh well . . . Bye . . ."

Stella put down the receiver. She bit her lip

and looked distastefully at the black phone. Why did it have to be black? Why did it make such a horrid noise? Why did it have to exist at all?

And why had Christopher rung her up? Why was she being dragged into it?

Barbara was busy with her list again. "Things We Mustn't Forget."

"Did you ask Madge and Sonia to bring mugs and paper plates?"

That's the first time Christopher has ever rung me up, thought Stella.

"Strange that he should ring me just because Nicholas isn't home yet. His mother is worried, and now Christopher wants to set out and look for him. 'Father and I,' he said. And he would have liked a couple of us to have gone too. He asked if I'd go. Did you ever! What help would I be? And I really haven't got time . . ."

Stella broke off in mid-sentence. "Haven't got time." That sounded horrid.

"How do you set about looking for someone, anyway? Where do you start?"

She remembered what it had been like that time Peter had disappeared last autumn; Peter, her youngest brother, who was just five. It had been during the lunch hour while Stella was home and her mother had asked her to pop over to Timothy's and fetch Peter. But Peter wasn't at Timothy's, and Timothy wasn't there either. Stella ran on to some other near neighbors where the children often played. Her mother and

Brenda got out their bicycles and scoured all the places they could think of: the public playground, all the shops they frequented, all the bridges where boats were tied up — only to return, unsuccessful, to Timothy's family. Then they searched all the cellars and attics in their own and their neighbors' houses.

Panic increased. From an initial feeling of unease it grew relentlessly into an icy-cold feeling of horror. Peter was just five — too young to be allowed out of sight for even half an hour. Every bridge, every expanse of water, all the long, inpenetrable wooded areas the other side of the railway line flashed through the mind of Stella's mother. Cars that skidded, strangers who lured young children away. Terrible dramas acted themselves out deep in her subconscious, uncontrollable and terrifying. Peter was the person most precious to her, and anything imaginable could have happened to him. There was no method behind her search. It was completely haphazard, but became increasingly more intensive. It would have been an absolute impossibility for her to have stopped and sat down.

"It's obvious they just have to go on looking until they find him."

Barbara glanced up from her list. Stella had interrupted her story about Peter and his strange disappearance. The rest of it was barely interesting, anyway. You knew it was going to have a happy ending.

"And where was he, in fact?"

Stella wound the end of her narrow belt round her index finger and unwound it again.

"That's just it — we don't know. That's why Christopher rang . . ."

"I meant Peter!"

Stella was jolted back to the present.

"Oh, Peter. It was quite funny in the end. In the garden behind Timothy's house there's a playhouse tucked away in a corner. It really belongs to his sister. Tim and Peter had been playing 'Good night, sleep tight' in there. They'd even put cardboard over the windows and closed the door. Perhaps they'd really gone to sleep. I don't know. Anyway, no one had thought of looking in there."

The relief they'd all felt had been indescribable, and whenever there'd been any minor scare or upset since then, they had always had that little glimmer of hope that all would turn out well in the end. All of a sudden — incredibly perhaps, and even amusingly — everything would be as before.

"I'm sure it will turn out like that now. We're all worried for no reason. It's only four o'clock, and it won't be dark for ages. If Nicholas has gone for a really long walk . . ."

"But he's a sick person. That's why his mother's so worried," said Barbara quietly and sensibly.

"There are over forty miles of woodland from the railway line to the outskirts of the town and as far as the water and the islands in the other direction," Stella murmured to herself. "It's

quite impossible for us to look for someone in that sort of area — for Christopher to do it, I mean."

But perhaps he knew where to look. Nicholas had his usual walks. He often went out with his camera hanging on its brown strap around his neck. He had often stayed out a long while: this certainly wasn't the first time. In fact, he usually stayed out a long time. He strolled about on his own somewhere, looking at nature. Once he'd collapsed, but he'd soon been found and brought home. That had been last autumn.

"Once you've started a search, you can't give up before you've found him or before he turns up. Once you've started . . ."

Stella buried her face in her hands and sat there for a while in silence, her eyes closed. She didn't want to think about it or to be associated with it. He was sure to turn up. He'd soon be back home, and nothing would have happened. And Stella had such a lot to see to. She couldn't take on any more. She and Barbara had to get to the clubhouse in good time, in any case by seven o'clock. By then she had to have washed her hair, finished her blouse, and pressed her red trousers.

"I bet Christopher hasn't had time to fix the electric socket, you'll see," stated Barbara practically. "We'd better take an extension lead and an adaptor."

Barbara was just as far-sighted and practical as Stan.

# 8

The balloons bobbed about near the ceiling, tied together in multi-colored bunches. Thin wreaths of smoke drifted across the room. The fire crackled and flamed up whenever someone threw on another log.

They sat on the floor, using the cushions they had brought, their faces seeming different, less familiar and more interesting in the flickering firelight. Someone was strumming a guitar, and they all joined in singing for a while.

So far there was no real atmosphere. The party here in the clubhouse was like a fire that wouldn't burn. Most of them just sat about listlessly.

All the girls in the sports club had brought a partner. It was really crowded, and gradually more and more uninvited guests were turning up. They just came: suddenly they were there, and they stayed. The door kept opening and letting in a rush of cold air that pushed its way into the smoke and almost solid warmth. They had hung their outdoor clothes higgledy-piggledy on top of each other, and the small hall was soon nothing

more than a narrow tunnel between two rows of pegs bulging with articles of clothing. You just dragged a comb through your hair, touched up your lipstick, and took a quick glance around the room as you stood in the doorway. People kept on seeing others they knew. "Well, Leonard, hello!" "So you're here too, Betty!" Heavy shoes clattered on the floorboards. The newcomers wandered about for a while, saying hello here and there, offering around cigarettes, producing bottles of Coca-Cola out of nowhere. Then they sat down.

And each one of them felt as if he belonged.

The record player stood on a chair right by the kitchen door. The socket in the main room had failed. A record was playing, and a girl was singing in a throaty, suggestive voice: "Moonlight and music and love and romance."

Stella was sitting on the window seat, lost in thought, her arms around her knees. She could see the white windowpanes with the frost drawing glittering white lace curtains on the dark background of the night outside. It had turned colder.

Gordon was sitting beside her, his arm around her shoulders. Stella hardly noticed. She felt quite indifferent to it. It didn't mean a thing. She was unusually quiet that evening, and if she didn't keep the conversation going, then very little was ever said, for Gordon wasn't exactly talkative. Today he was taking Stella's silence as acquiescence: they didn't need words between them.

Stella's silence was really an unspeaking alertness. Her relaxation was only a veneer. Her shining round eyes were fixed on the door. She lifted her head whenever anyone came into the narrow hallway and strained to catch a glimpse of the new arrival through the smoky air and dim light.

Stella would never have believed it possible that she could have waited so impatiently for Christopher. She was longing to see him and very uneasy that he didn't come.

Nobody had actually invited him, and perhaps he didn't even know about the party. Perhaps he was doing something quite different. All the same . . . It was worrying that he didn't turn up, that he didn't suddenly appear in the doorway in his old worn leather jacket, his head bare, his pipe in his mouth, and his dark eyes as alert as ever. He never made a noise, never attracted people's attention, or shouted effusive greetings, or went around saying hello and slapping people on the back. He just attached himself unobtrusively to a group, sank into the nearest chair and stretched his legs out in front as he did at school, still wearing his jacket, his gloves in his hand, quite unperturbed and there as if by pure chance.

Why just not today?

If Stella closed her eyes she could almost see the two of them: Christopher leading the way, steady and sure of himself, Nicholas trudging behind, a little breathless because of the steep slope, Nicholas in his flapping baggy coat, his

gray cap pulled down over his forehead, a green scarf under his collar. That's new. But it's not very light here, and no one notices . . .

Stella sat up. Nothing had happened: none of the newcomers were at all interesting — hardly welcome. In fact, uninvited guests. She fanned the smoke out of her eyes with her hand. When the ashes collapsed in the grate it was almost dark. Cigarettes glowed in red pinpoints. The smoke climbed slowly in gray spirals to the ceiling.

"We should have known from the start it would be like this," she said impatiently. "Hordes of people always come . . . We should have someone at the door to turn them away. They don't belong here."

Then, after a long silence, disappointed and distraught because it was still only other people coming in, she added, "I can't understand why Christopher doesn't come. He must have . . ."

Barbara, busy with the fire at that moment, spun around and looked at Stella's pale face. Firelight played on her smooth blonde hair; her eyes were in shadow. She looked strange and different.

Barbara looked surprised. For the first time someone was noticing Christopher's absence and actually remarking on it.

"Christopher? What do you want Christopher for?"

Gordon couldn't understand it at all. He knew that Stella didn't like Christopher. Now she was

craning her neck again and looking expectantly toward the door.

"What's the matter? Why are you so fidgety?"

"Well, don't you see . . ."

She couldn't come straight out with it — it would have sounded odd, perhaps even like a challenge. No one had said a word about it. No one had asked. Was there really cause to be worried? She was the only one who was anxious. No one else was.

But she couldn't stop thinking.

She jumped up, spreading her feeling of disquiet.

"I must ring Christopher."

It was nothing out of the ordinary. They often had to ring each other up; it happened all the time. But it was difficult to appreciate that it was Christopher whom Stella suddenly wanted to telephone. Gordon was surprised. Amazed. But he stayed ready to please and as charming as ever. A moment later Stella was sitting beside him in the big cold car.

There was a phone box on the station not far away. They searched their pockets for change, and Stella leafed through the phonebook for Christopher's number. Then Gordon went to wait in the car; perhaps to think about Stella and her strange whims and fancies. She was a problem from start to finish.

No answer. She dialed again. And again. Nothing. It was gone ten. When she hung up at last she picked up the pile of change. She still

felt uneasy, so she looked up Nicholas's number, got another coin ready, and slowly turned the dial.

Perhaps they were in bed. What would they think if they were woken up and asked about Nicholas? And Nicholas himself, his stammering, confused flood of words, his face suddenly lighting up . . . Did you have the right to scare someone else with your own worries at this time of night? She should have phoned hours ago.

She could hear the ringing tone. Then it stopped and the pips started as someone picked up the receiver, but Stella didn't use the coin she held ready in her hand. She would never know the answer. She threw down the receiver as if it was burning her hand.

It was all quite ridiculous. If something really had happened to Nicholas, of course they would have heard about it.

Gordon had the light on in the car. He had found a newspaper in the glove compartment. When Stella left the phone box he immediately got out and came around the car to open the door for her. He was like that: he didn't just reach across the front seat and open the door from inside. He was a gentleman.

"Did you get him?"

"No. No answer."

She couldn't bring herself to tell him that she had rung Nicholas's home and then hung up as soon as someone had answered.

"We should have done something after all,

Gordon. We should have gone out to look for him. That's why Christopher rang up . . ."

Gordon looked at her for a long time in silence.

"So that's why you've been so restless and strange all evening. Because of Nicholas?"

Stella looked down at her knees. Yes, that was why. Didn't he see? Didn't he understand how serious it might be?

Gordon backed the car. How small, how helpless, she was, sitting beside him, so full of contradictions and so attractive! Her behavior was just as puzzling as ever, and he certainly didn't think they understood each other.

"Let's drive around for a bit."

He couldn't face the noise and the crush in the clubhouse. He was thinking of quiet, dark woodland paths and Stella beside him in the warm seclusion of the car.

"We must get straight back to the hut," said Stella.

Perhaps Christopher and Nicholas had arrived in the meanwhile. It wasn't even half past ten yet. Christopher could turn up at any moment. He had often done that just as they were about to pack up. No one knew where he appeared from.

The balloons were still bobbing about near the ceiling; the warm and smoky air felt almost solid, like a wall; the music was turned up as loud as it would go. A naked bulb hung from the ceiling, shining yellow, red, green, and blue through the balloons clustered around it like a bunch of

grapes. All the chairs had been arranged in two rows down the middle, back to back. Everyone was trotting around them in a long line, hands on the shoulders of the person in front, faces set with grim determination. Paul was sitting by the record player. He had put on a march that was easy to keep time to.

Suddenly the music stopped. A terrible din; fights for chairs; and Madge's look of disappointment. She hadn't got a chair. Then off again: Dum-di-dum. Atmosphere . . . gaiety . . .

Stella took off her jacket and shook the cold air out of her hair. True, it would have been easier to have left, to have gone home, sipped a hot drink, and crept into bed. Yet she had to stay there; she simply had to stay and find out . . . If there was anything to find out. She pulled Barbara out of the line.

"Has Christopher . . .?"

"Stella! You're crazy!"

Barbara shook herself free and slipped back into the line of marching people. She looked as if she was determined to win that game. She always joined in everything heart and soul, and was always out to win.

Stella sat down in her old place by the window. She didn't feel like joining in. Gordon sank down beside her. He was disappointed, confused, and making great efforts not to let it show.

He took out a packet of cigarettes and offered them to Stella. She didn't smoke, and he knew she didn't, but he still always offered her one

before he lit one himself. Stella suddenly turned on him like a wild cat, knocking the cigarettes out of his hand. She just couldn't take it any longer.

"What's the matter with you? You know I don't smoke."

Suddenly she stiffened. She sat there bolt upright, her attention riveted on the door. For there stood Christopher, his leather jacket hanging open, his head bare. He glanced around the hut, his expression tense and drawn.

Stella wanted to dash up to him, grasp his arm, make him look at her, speak to her . . . But she stayed sitting quite still. Now that he was there at last and she could actually see him she realized how little she knew about him. She and Christopher didn't like each other. It just wasn't possible for her to dash up to him like an excited child to hear the news. He might push her out of the way impatiently. Just as she had pushed away Gordon's outstretched hand.

Earlier that afternoon Christopher had turned to her and asked her help. Then she had been so busy, she hadn't had a moment. There was no reason why he should turn to her particularly. She raised her head, craned her neck, her eyes searching the darkness behind him. There was no large, happy, childlike face to be seen over his shoulder.

Then Stella noticed the dog. Christopher had the big black Alsatian with him, the dog that usually accompanied his father on his evening

walks. He gave a brief signal to the dog to sit at his feet. He was holding him on a short lead. The dog was panting, his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth. From time to time he looked up at Christopher attentively. He looked tired and worn out, as if he'd been walking for miles.

Christopher's calm and the dog's alertness had something about them that boded ill. Stella stood up, and their eyes met. He nodded almost imperceptibly. Now the time had come for her to cross the room, walk around the people playing in the center and go up to him. She could feel that he was waiting for her. She loosed her hand from Gordon's. He made as if to follow her, but then sat down again. Her resoluteness made her strong and solitary. He sank back on the seat.

When Stella came face to face with Christopher at last, she felt as if she had come a long and wearisome way. Christopher wasn't as tall as Gordon, and he didn't look at her. He seemed to be concentrating on the boisterous game the others were playing. The dog's nose sniffed inquiringly around her legs, but quickly lost interest. The secret wasn't there.

"Don't stroke him," said Christopher, still without looking at her.

"Nicholas? Has Nicholas turned up?"

Christopher shook his head, and Stella could see his bitterness giving way to deep concern. She swayed and gripped his arm. He looked at her and led her gently to one side without saying

a word. Then he went over to Paul, who was still sitting by the record player.

The music stopped. Again there was chaos around the chairs, shrieking and laughter. Barbara was the unlucky one who was out.

Stella, Christopher, and Paul didn't notice. Christopher was talking softly to Paul. Stella was there beside him, listening to every word. Suddenly the room was quiet, unnaturally quiet — all was curiosity and confusion. One after the other they came crowding up.

"What's up?"

"What's happened?"

Christopher took a step into the center of the room.

Automatically a wide circle formed around him and his big dog.

"Nicholas has disappeared. He's been missing all day. We must call some helpers and mount a search."

It was a little after eleven. The balloons hung round and light as clouds up at the ceiling, and cold air swept in through the door, mingling with the smoke. Outside the wind was blowing up the light frost so that it looked as if it was snowing. It was cloudy, and the moon was almost full. The night was clear and cold.

# 9

It was like dragging a rake through the woods, a rake with living teeth, pulled along by the hand of an invisible giant. They moved forward in long rows, combing the woods, taking care to keep about thirty feet apart the whole time. It was impossible to keep exactly to thirty feet or to keep the rows moving forward at exactly the same pace, and at times they wavered like paper streamers in the wind.

The ground was frozen hard. The stumps and stones were covered with a thin film of ice. An unreal, magical atmosphere hung over the woods. In the cool moonlight, trees and their shadows were transformed into long, thin strips that disappeared into the darkness. Snow or frost hung in the air, swirling suddenly before their eyes, obscuring all visibility.

Stella was on the left flank, Christopher and his dog next to her on the right. She could hear Christopher's voice, the snapping of twigs under foot, the splintering of the thin film of ice

beneath their feet. Now and again he spoke quietly to the dog, which he was still holding on a lead. It was a large, strong dog, and Stella was afraid of him. Christopher had warned her not to get too close because you had to give him time to get used to you. She let the strong beam of her torch play on the trees, and in the dancing light they seemed to be moving forward, making mystic circles around her.

"Put that light out!" came Christopher's voice suddenly. He had lent her his torch and carried a large inspection lamp himself. "It's light enough here. The trees aren't so thick, and we're almost at the lake. If you keep the light on all the time you'll get night blindness. And we don't know how long that battery is going to last, either."

Stella switched off the torch. For a moment everything around her went black, as if someone had pulled a sack over her head. She stumbled, and then stood still for a moment with her eyes closed.

It had all happened so quickly since Christopher had appeared in the doorway. They had packed up without more ado, overcoming those first panic-filled seconds of uncertainty and fear. They had all rushed about the room gathering their things together. They had all been dressed casually, and had come in ski-pants and boots, but some of them still had to go home and change into more suitable clothes. The others stood about in groups, talking quietly, uncertain

what to do. There was a large area to be covered. They might have done better to have fanned out in all directions.

"The Scout group are already on their way, and the Civil Defense too," called Christopher. "But the more people who can help the better. Naturally, it's purely voluntary, particularly for the girls. We'll all meet at the school."

Stella had pulled on her black quilted anorak that was still quite new and shiny and light as a feather. Barbara, Stan, and Paul were standing ready. Gordon hung about, lost in thought, smiling a little sheepishly.

"I could take you home, Stella."

Stella looked at him in astonishment.

"Home? No, we must stay here and help. We can't go home."

Gordon would much rather have made himself scarce. He would have been most relieved not to have had to join in, you could see that. Well-bred and charming as ever, he stood there in his smart Nappa coat and a light yellow polo-necked sweater. He was fighting a difficult battle, for he hated having to make quick decisions and act on them.

"I must go home and change," he muttered casually and disappeared.

Suddenly Stella remembered something. She could just picture it. It had been a couple of years ago, and she had almost forgotten Gordon's frightened, worried expression, his willingness to stand back and let others take over. It had hap-

pened one summer. They were out in a sailing dinghy in a choppy sea when a storm caught them by surprise and hit them like a lash from a whip. It might have cost them the mast if the helmsman hadn't been so deft and quick-witted. "Women and children, below deck!" was the cry, and they went below to stand huddled like wet rats in the ship's cabin, clutching their coats together at the neck and looking up through the hatch into the daylight. They could hear the sea beating against the sides and crashing onto the deck with mighty blows, the rain rattling down in an attempt to drown all other noises. And there was Gordon in among them. He had come straight below with them quite as a matter of course. Perhaps it was only natural: he was a very inexperienced sailor, after all. It was only right that he should relinquish his place to those who knew what to do up there in the storm. No one had given it a second thought. Only Stella had been surprised for a brief moment.

He was acting in exactly the same way now. He looked worried and afraid, not knowing what he could do to help. He was letting other people act . . .

Stella pulled on her boots over her thick socks. Some of them were already starting up their cars or setting off on mopeds. Others were running down the shortcut across the playing field to the town. Some of the girls were staying behind in the hut to clear up.

"There are so many of you, after all," said Madge.

Stella ran down the shortcut with Barbara, Stan, and Christopher.

She had forgotten Gordon and his car.

"They announced his disappearance on the seven o'clock news," said Christopher. "It's because he's ill that they did it so soon. Generally they wait at least twenty-four hours. So many young people go missing from home that they can't give descriptions of all of them over the air just because their mothers are worried."

About fifty people had gathered in the school grounds, but on the large playing fields beneath that cold winter sky they seemed a small, straggling group. There were a good many adults among them, the games master, and two policemen. The games master had his whistle. He gave orders and explanations and whistled almost continuously. It looked as if they were setting off on a reconnaissance expedition.

They spent a long time studying a map of the area by torchlight and discussed it in a little huddle. The windows of the modern flats on the rising ground behind the school building shone out in the darkness. They were gaily lit, but still rather strange. There people were sitting in cozy, warm rooms listening to music, eating, and drinking. Here in the wind-whipped school yard they were setting off to look for a missing person.

For a while Christopher was standing next to

Stella with his dog. He looked frozen, and she wished he would put something over his head, but of course she couldn't ask him to. He asked where Gordon was.

"You needn't come with us. It's going to be cold tonight."

She was freezing already and wished they could start. A little way in front of her Barbara was hanging on to Stan's arm and jumping from one foot to the other to keep warm. It was all confused and unreal, like a dream. Odd snatches of conversation, stray beams of light illuminating faces as they passed, then everything dark and quiet once more.

"Don't you think I can be of any use?"

Stella was terrified of being left out. She couldn't bear to be inactive. She wouldn't be able to face the threatening disaster alone and would rather be there among the helpers.

"Yes, of course you can. I just said that because it's so cold and because it's going to take so long."

At last the games master and the policemen had finished their consultation. At the far end of the school yard, apart from the group, Christopher's father wandered hesitantly up and down, bareheaded like his son, a cigarette hanging from the side of his mouth, his baggy coat flapping open. Christopher glanced across at him from time to time, while the dog sat quite still at his feet. His father came closer.

"Can't I help, Chris?"

His voice sounded hoarse. Christopher waved him away.

"Oh, go home and lie down, Father. There are so many of us."

He retreated a little, walked up and down again, undecided. Christopher peered across at Stella.

"He's so lonely, my old man. He can't bear being alone."

Christopher told her a lot in those few words. Again Stella was uneasy for no apparent reason. A feeling of not-wanting-to-know took hold of her — as it so often did.

There were a lot of things she would rather not know, so many things she wanted to keep at a distance. She was well aware of that. Nicholas and his disappearance, Christopher and his strange father . . .

The games master shouted out his orders, clearly sketching out the route they should take. They should go in a straight line through the woods, across the little frozen lake, on up the mountain behind the waterworks, and then down to the bay. Straight ahead the whole time, up hill and down dale, through the undergrowth and over boggy ground. "We shall be spaced thirty feet apart and keep in close contact the whole time. We've got torches. The moment anyone sees anything suspicious we must all stand still until the place has been thoroughly searched. The people on each end of the line will be given a compass and a whistle."

They set off, spread out, taking in a wide area of woodland. Stella did some mental arithmetic and worked out that they were combing a width of about 500 yards. She could picture it clearly, that large rake with living teeth.

Instinctively she kept close to Christopher. She only knew one or two members of the large search party, and Christopher was the only one who could stop her feeling left out. When she was near him she felt protected, despite his unfriendly, often bitter manner and his sullen silence. He was the only one looking for Nicholas of his own free will. He alone, among all those who had gathered together so quickly, had personal connections with Nicholas. Perhaps that was the reason: through Christopher it all took on meaning and reality. Through him there was Nicholas, and Nicholas had to be found.

Stella couldn't see all this clearly, couldn't explain it logically, but she concentrated anxiously on keeping her place beside Christopher. She didn't notice that Christopher, in his turn, was taking just as much trouble to stay near her. She just felt an inexplicable relief that Gordon had stayed away. His charming good manners suddenly seemed like a plastic wrapper covering his real self. He would have turned this search into a purely impersonal thing and would not have become involved in it himself. For Stella it had become something very personal, something that affected her directly.

As she moved forward alone those thirty feet seemed an immeasurable distance in the darkness of the wood. She had expected to recognize every stone and ditch, every tree and bush. She had come this way so many times when out for a stroll. But she had never been here at midnight. Now the wood seemed strange and alarmingly large. The thirty-foot distance turned into a huge, gaping crevasse. The flickering torchlight created new and dangerous shadows between the trees. Her heart leapt at every unexpected hump in the ground, at every shadow in the undergrowth that looked a darker shade of black.

It was real. They had set out to look for someone who had been missing for many hours, and they could come across him at any moment. With every minute that passed Stella lived through a new, unexpected encounter with Nicholas. Sometimes he was dead, sometimes half frozen, injured; sometimes he was simply standing there, leaning against a tree, waiting for them. Over and over Stella lived those scenes in her imagination. She jumped at every tiny noise and every human shape she imagined in the bushes.

In the end was it she, she herself, who was destined to find him? Stella heard Christopher say something to his dog, and then heard him call out encouragingly, "Stella, are you there? Don't lag behind!"

He turned up quite close to her as they stepped

onto the little frozen lake. It lay wide and bright in the moonlight, and the people on it looked like black dots on a white sheet of paper.

"How do you feel?" he asked. He took a bar of chocolate from his pocket. "Have some — it'll do you good."

"Do you think we'll find him?" asked Stella, breathless, her voice wavering.

"I don't believe he would have come this way. He seldom came here. After all, he lives on the other side of town, doesn't he? But he often went down to the lake and across the ice to the islands. We've already been over there this afternoon, and now the Scouts have gone there again. You never know . . ."

Stella didn't want to talk about it, but something inside her made her continue.

"I'm sorry I didn't come with you this afternoon. I should have, and I'm ashamed I didn't, especially if he was so definite about coming around to my place. I feel almost partly to blame."

It was senseless, there was no connection — but Stella still couldn't shake free of it. It was inescapable. The thought that Nicholas really had intended to come around to her place hemmed her in with an invisible, threatening barrier. He had been going to come today — before he had set out on this lonely walk. Had it been last week — or even the day before yesterday — it would have had nothing to do with her. Now she felt involved, almost guiltily.

Heatedly, and with brutal frankness, Christopher came out with what he was thinking.

"We shan't find him, I know we shan't. If we do find him he'll be dead."

"No! Don't say that!" cried Stella, grasping his arm.

"Look, Stella, you know very well that Nicholas was a quiet, thoughtful person. He never tried to make a drama out of anything. He took life quietly, as it came. And he would have been home ages ago if nothing serious had happened to him."

"He could have broken his leg. He could have got lost."

Christopher shrugged. That's why they were all out looking for him, after all — so that they would be able to help him in time.

"Nicholas was quite at home in the woods. You should have seen him out here in the open air, Stella. He was completely different — quiet, agile, good at tracking. He was at one with nature. It's difficult to explain what I mean. He knew where to look for things; he knew so much; he was an ornithologist, and a good deal more besides. If you went for a walk in the woods with Nicholas he was the one who did the leading. I'm much less attuned to nature. You know me — the only time I enjoy the woods is when I can race along the twisting narrow paths on my motorbike. Nicholas reminded me of a bear sometimes — large, ungainly, and clumsy at

home, but agile, lively, and sure of himself, acting on instinct, out in the open."

They had crossed the little lake, and the steep, craggy rocks towered tall and dark on the farther bank. Trees growing from the cracks and crevices in the rock threw long, dark shadows. Stella was freezing. Why did Christopher persist in using the past tense, as if it were all over?

"I should have gone too. I should have gone with him on this walk," she said softly, unhappily.

"Don't keep thinking about it. It doesn't do any good."

Christopher called the dog to heel, and quickly returned to his place. Stella felt more alone than ever. She was at the mercy of her own feelings and of the night, of that dark mountain that was safe and easy to climb by daylight, but towered like a wall in the darkness, full of hidden dangers.

"Are we really expected to climb straight up the face of this mountain?" she called helplessly, but no one heard her.

She stumbled into bushes and undergrowth, becoming more and more frightened with every step she took. Then the climb began. She switched on her torch and tried to pick out the path she should take. The icy ground made it difficult to move along. Something rustled up above her, something big and dark, a shape that jumped down toward her. Christopher's dog sniffed around her legs, but she wasn't afraid. He seemed to be bringing greetings from his master. At that

moment her feet slipped, and she reached in vain for a hand-hold.

"Christopher!" called Stella. "I can't get up this way."

But she managed to climb a little higher, playing the beam of her torch on the ground and peering carefully about her. They were there to search, after all.

The trees grew more sparsely, and it was lighter. They had climbed to the top. Already the line of the ridge was showing up like the bent back of a giant lizard against the matt color of the sky. The harsh sound of the whistle cut through the sounds of the night. The games master came past at a trot. He was checking the line of searchers before they crossed the ridge and went on down through the pathless, jungle-like terrain to the water.

"It would be best if we went in twos here," he suggested.

The mountain sloped in steep, broken rocks to the bay. Far below shimmered the inlet, its frozen surface shining dully like old pewter.

"Be careful," warned Christopher. "It's very slippery here."

Suddenly her heart leapt. Here. Perhaps they would find him here. Here it would be very easy for someone to fall.

"King and I have already been along here once today. I searched carefully and called his name, and King darted about all over the place. He's

very thorough when he's searching. Nicholas isn't here, I'm sure of it, although I grant you there are some inaccessible spots."

Christopher held out his hand to Stella, and she jumped down to him. He braked the jump so that she wouldn't fall.

Then Christopher climbed on ahead, shining his torch on stones and patches of ground where Stella might find a foothold, giving a helping hand or lifting her over difficult parts. By doing this he managed to lead her down the untrodden mountain as if down an easy flight of stairs. Stella hardly noticed how well she was getting on. They were already past the steep part of the descent, and the slope was sinking gently to the water, the ground riddled with springs and narrow watercourses. Now it was easy to get along, for the frozen earth was firm beneath their feet.

If he had been lying here in this wood they might well have come right past him, thought Stella. They were spaced too wide apart to have been able to search everywhere thoroughly. Still deep in thought, she stumbled. One foot slipped from under her, sending a searing pain through her ankle. She had slipped on an icy patch in the dark. She sat there rubbing her hurting foot with both hands. Tears suddenly started running down her cheeks, and the sobs she had managed to hold back for so long now got the better of her, brought on by the physical pain.

The sound of the whistle rang out ominously through the quiet wood.

"They've found him!" whispered Stella, paralyzed with fear.

Christopher knew it was just the signal calling them all together. It was time to break the chain and gather around their leader. He helped Stella to her feet. She staggered, and every step hurt so much that Christopher had to support her.

"We must go to the path by the shore. Come on, calm down."

Once more she was shaking with fear. She didn't want to see the picture she had painted for herself so many times already that evening — people coming silently through the dark wood carrying a stretcher between them.

The helpers came streaming down to the shore path from all directions. Torchlight flickered through the trees and disappeared. Here the bay widened and the path closely followed the line of the shore. The wintry gray was reflected in the icy water. It was almost daylight.

They didn't bring him. The terrifying picture faded. There were no men with a stretcher.

Not here, not now. It was all over. They had found him a couple of hours ago. Men from the Civil Defense League had found him in the almost impenetrable area the other side of the railway.

A policeman in uniform had driven over here in his car to intercept the chain of searchers and inform them. They were all clustering around him now.

Stella clutched tight hold of Christopher's arm, tears streaming unheeded down her cheeks.

Yes, he was dead. He must have fallen, probably from the steep cliff near the war memorial. Death must have been instantaneous. It was pure chance that they had found the body at all, for only a very narrow path lead past the spot, a path that could be reached solely from the water.

Heavy silence had fallen. People hardly dared breathe. It was noticeably colder. Now and then faint crackling noises and the soft sound of singing drifted across the ice-covered expanse of water to where they stood on the shore.

# 10

Stella had propped up her injured foot on a kitchen stool, and Christopher, with hard but practiced hands, was binding it up with an elastic bandage. The foot was swollen and very painful.

"You must go to a doctor first thing tomorrow morning and have it X-rayed."

Stella nodded. Automatically she did everything Christopher told her. Everything inside her felt empty, dead.

He had put a cup of hot black coffee on the table.

"Drink it," he ordered.

Stella drank obediently, although she hated black coffee, while Christopher fastened the end of the bandage with a safety pin and pulled up her sock over the bandaged ankle.

"There you are. Better?"

For a brief moment his expression softened like the fleeting caress of a hand on a cheek.

It was good to have this twisted ankle and to know that Christopher was there beside you to look after you, close by and reliable. Again

Stella gave a sob. She was completely worn out and over-excited.

"Perhaps it wouldn't have happened if I'd made time for him today. Perhaps it only happened because I . . ."

That same softness of Christopher's expression could be heard in his voice.

"You mustn't look at it like that, Stella. What happened has nothing to do with you. You weren't connected with it."

"But I still feel as though I let him down, as though it's my fault."

Christopher stood up. Every trace of softness had disappeared. His expression turned hard and bitter, as it almost always was. This realization was coming too late. It was high time for her to shut up about it. Anyway, he doubted the sincerity of her self-accusations.

"You never put yourself to the trouble of looking at the contents when you don't like the wrappings. You just left well enough alone, didn't you!"

Stella bowed her head. It might have been better expressed, but Christopher had gone straight to the point as always.

"He frightened me . . ."

"Frightened you! Fancy thinking that Nicholas could frighten anybody. There never was anyone more harmless! He knew an awful lot; he was very far from stupid. Funnily enough, he was full of humor and could laugh at himself. Whenever he got over the feeling that he was repulsive

and different — and naturally he often felt like that — then he was happy and full of ideas. It was never boring being with him. It's a damn disgrace that none of you really knew him and that he frightened you all just because he was plump and clumsy and simply different from the others."

Christopher paced a few steps up and down the small kitchen. He couldn't sit still.

"He was ill, though," murmured Stella, as if that was the key to it all.

Christopher bent down and looked steadily at her.

"Ill? Nicholas was different from the rest of us — that was his illness!"

It sounded cruel when Christopher put it like that. She hated herself and shrank back. No, it hadn't been his illness.

Outside in the narrow hall the dog lay in his large basket. His head lay on his front paws, and he gave the impression of being asleep, but his wakeful eyes followed Stella's every move. From time to time he growled. It sounded threatening to Stella. Christopher went over and talked to him.

"He always takes time to get used to people. I'm sure he thinks we're quarreling."

"But we're not," said Stella dully. The pain was raging in her foot. If only she could think about the foot and not about Nicholas the whole time. She couldn't. She had to go on trying to sort herself out.

"Anyway, it can't have been easy for him, being so full of inhibitions. Perhaps it was all for the best."

Christopher sat down facing her. His dark eyes were watching her closely — like the dog's. It was high time she understood him correctly. He had to make her do it, it was important.

"Nicholas wasn't handicapped in any way. If only you'd seen his photographs, if only you'd walked with him through the woods with binoculars and camera, if only you'd put yourself to the trouble of getting to know him, then it would never have crossed your mind to have called him handicapped. Nor would you have said that what has happened was all for the best. What's done is done, and we can't alter it. People always try to find a reason for things afterwards. It's cowardly and all too easy to hide behind the idea that it's all for the best and not to give it another thought.

"And aren't we, every single one of us, handicapped in some way or other? We all have our limits and mistakes and inhibitions. That's what makes us individuals, different from everyone else. We all have disappointments, worries, and difficulties in getting on with others. We all have our quite unique experiences that bring joy or happiness to us alone. How dare anyone maintain that one person's unhappiness or difficulties are greater or more painful than another's? Where are the scales that can weigh them against each other?

"No, Nicholas certainly wasn't handicapped, even if he wasn't such a fine specimen as your Gordon."

Words and more words, unending. Christopher was turning everything upside down. Nothing stayed as it was. Not even Gordon . . . Stella sat up. She wanted to come to his defense — not because he had stayed away and let her down, but just because he was Gordon, that charming, well-brought-up young man. He had a right to be exactly as he was.

"There's nothing wrong with that," she said weakly. "But the way you put it, you make it sound wrong to be polite, well groomed, and good-looking. And anyway, it's not my fault — I mean, that Gordon and Nicholas both . . ."

It wasn't Stella's fault. She hadn't given them any encouragement. Sometimes it had even made her unhappy. Christopher's hand stroked her hair. A slight smile was on his lips. He must give her time . . .

"No, it's not your fault, Stella. You're not to blame that we were all in love with you at once. Nicholas, too! But he didn't give up when it was so obvious that you preferred Gordon. He just understood better than the rest of us, saw it all more clearly. He was happy just to know that you existed, to see you every day, and have you sit near him in class."

Now it was starting again: Christopher was bringing it all back. It was coming over her again, that feeling she had had in the classroom of being

shut in. Nicholas's large hands and his blissful expression. It was all coming flooding back. She buried her face in her hands.

"It's not fair of you. I never asked you to. I didn't want you all to fall in love with me. I don't want . . ."

Her cheeks were hot and feverish. She brushed her hair back out of her eyes, not daring to look at Christopher.

"Don't you see that I just want to be left in peace? But none of you will leave me alone. That's why it all happened as it did on Thursday. I simply couldn't stand Nicholas hanging around me any more, or his happiness in knowing I was near. His mother was watching me the whole time and she'd heard so much about me. That's why things turned out as they did. Gordon was shielding me from it all."

Why had it all happened like that? She didn't know. Only a year ago it would have been different. Perhaps it had something to do with the "wrappings," as Christopher had said. Yes, everything depended on them. People are always interested in a beautifully wrapped parcel. They are immediately attracted by it and are sure there will be something lovely inside. They expect so much from it. Then it turns out to be nothing special after all. Like Gordon . . . And Stella herself? Was she like that too? Was it her hair, her eyes, her walk? Was it all that which attracted people's attention? And then was there perhaps nothing behind it?

She pulled out her little pocket mirror and peered into it without recognizing the reflection she saw there. Her face was swollen from crying, her blonde hair was clinging to her head in rats' tails.

"Can't you see that people just want to be left in peace?" she cried defiantly.

"Well, now you've got what you wanted," said Christopher harshly. "Nicholas will never bother you again."

Stella swallowed. "You're cruel, Christopher, and you were cruel to Nicholas, too. You were always teasing him and pulling his leg. It was awful just having to listen to it."

Christopher passed her a dry, clean handkerchief. He didn't look at all angry, just surprised.

"Was I? I didn't realize. And I'm sure Nicholas didn't take offense. Or do you think he couldn't stand being teased? Do you think he should have worn a placard around his neck saying 'Handle with care' and 'Do not annoy'? I liked him, and he knew it, and that's why he put up with lots of leg-pulling — or my cruelty, as you call it. He wasn't any different from anyone else in that respect. He wasn't even particularly sensitive. But you can't appreciate that, Stella, I can see."

Then Christopher told her about Dave, someone he'd worked with that summer. Dave was a Negro — upright, perhaps a little impulsive and stubborn, meticulous when it came to questions

of money, and almost overpunctual. He was a student from America and knew about racial discrimination first-hand.

"He felt quite at home with us, but there was one thing he just couldn't get used to: that over-effusive heartiness so many people showed toward him. There's a certain type of person that can't do enough to be helpful and kind, slapping other people on the back at every opportunity, assuring them of how much they like Negroes. These people genuinely aren't prejudiced, but they feel they have to go around proving it all the time. They didn't let Dave forget for a minute that his skin was a few shades darker than ours. And there was nothing Dave wanted more than to be treated as one human being among other human beings. He didn't want any special treatment. He simply wanted people to accept him, just as Nicholas did. Now do you understand?"

Stella sat there looking at the floor. Perhaps she understood, perhaps she didn't. It wasn't easy to follow Christopher's line of thought.

"You mean, we shouldn't put any importance in outward appearances?"

"Well, it isn't that simple. 'Appearances' are always there. They're the first things we see, and we can't get away from it. But we shouldn't leave it at that."

"If only we could be better people," said Stella.

"I don't know . . . To be good, to want to be better — they're very tame-sounding words, and

there's so little behind them. They're often just a euphemism for cowardice and laziness. People should have more courage. They should know more, be more aware, have more understanding. That way the fear disappears."

He sat there in silence for a long while sucking at his cold pipe, but Stella felt as if he were still giving her a lecture. She drank her coffee. She had propped up her foot on the kitchen table, and at times it still hurt. How was she to get her boot back on?

Suddenly Christopher's father appeared in the doorway.

"So you're back, then."

He didn't look at Stella, nor did he show any surprise. Perhaps it was neither unusual nor surprising for Christopher to bring a young lady back for coffee after midnight.

"Have some coffee," offered Christopher. "It's still hot. We've only just had ours."

His father went to the stove and took the coffeepot from the ring. Then he went to the cupboard and fetched himself a cup.

Stella hadn't noticed his arrival, but now that she heard his rough, tired voice, it suddenly dawned on her where she was. It was only then that she saw the sink full of dirty dishes, the saucepans on the stove, the dirty towels on the hook. The refrigerator door was ajar. The center light cast a cold gleam. The smell of coffee filled the room, mixed with the smell of wet shoes. There was a torn plastic tablecloth on the table,

and the night sky stood out against the bare windowpanes. Lots of overcoats, boots, a bicycle, the dog in his basket in the narrow hall. A brown curtain and a worn carpet . . .

To Stella it was all new and very strange, unreal and distantly dream-like. She lowered her foot to the ground and tried to stand. She wanted to put out her hand and say, "Hello, I'm Stella," as she generally did, but you couldn't do that here, it would have looked stupid. Stella gripped the edge of the table and waited.

"I ought to go now."

Then Christopher's arm shot out, and she felt his rough hand on her wrist, pushing her back into the chair. The dog came in out of the hall and gave a deep-throated growl.

"Do you want to run away?" he asked, so softly that only she could hear. "Are you always going to run away when something in life isn't quite as you would like it? Just stay where you are. My father's not dangerous."

His father came slowly across to the table, his coffee cup in his hand. He nodded to Stella, and he really did look quite harmless.

"This is Stella, a friend from school," explained Christopher. "She was one of Nicholas's friends too."

For a while the three of them sat around the table, Christopher talking softly to his father. They bent toward each other, discussing the terrible accident in lowered tones. Stella felt

excluded. The two of them seemed like strangers from a foreign land, whose language she didn't understand and whose worries and concerns she couldn't share.

Christopher's father was wearing a wine-red dressing-gown and slippers, his gray hair combed straight back, his striped pajamas open at the neck and showing the hair on his chest which was just as gray as the hair on the backs of his hands. He looked tired and old. Stella relaxed, suddenly realizing how tired she felt herself and how good it was just to sit here. All of a sudden the tension was gone. There was no strange kitchen and there were no strange people talking in a strange language — everything seemed quite natural. She could feel the warmth of the room, the affection between the two men: she felt protected. What did she have to fear? Not even the dog, for even he was no longer on guard and had fallen asleep. Every part of her relaxed. She felt perfectly calm and knew that she would come through it all all right. She would be able to summon the strength to go home and tell her mother all about it — for her mother was sure to be lying awake waiting.

"I must go home now. My mother's bound to be worrying."

Christopher glanced at the clock. It was four o'clock, and the moon had already set.

"See that the girl gets home all right," said his father.

They had a good way to go. It was cold, and snow hung in the air. Stella had to sit on the crossbar of Christopher's bicycle, for she could hardly bear to place any weight on her foot. They were silent. There was nothing more to say, and they were both tired.

# 11

Stella stood there in Nicholas's bedroom, his mother behind her, dressed all in black, as was his sister. Christopher stood by the door. Stella, who had fought against it so stubbornly before, was now standing in that very room and looking about her.

A bed, bookcases with lots of books, pictures on the wall, a writing table. A deep built-in wardrobe that doubled up as a darkroom and laboratory, long rows of brown bottles of developing and fixing fluids on a working surface, and lots of other objects that Stella couldn't identify. Over there were a camera and a tripod, lamps, and a thousand other things: all the equipment a photographer needed.

His mother pulled open a drawer in the writing table. It was full of photographs: there were heaps of them lying there, some of them rolled up, their corners bent. Stella picked up a couple, but couldn't see anything special about them. You could see photographs anywhere.

Everybody you knew took photographs these days.

Suddenly she understood what Christopher had meant when he had spoken of Nicholas's talent. The photographs were really artistic. It took a great deal of patience and hard work, a great capacity for feeling and insight to see and capture nature like that. Every single photograph was of something connected with nature study: animals, birds, insects, an elk bounding over the moors, tall reeds mirrored in a clear mountain lake. Difficult subjects. But Nicholas had succeeded in capturing them all on his slides and films.

How dreadful, thought Stella, that a person with such interests, such gifts, was suddenly no longer there! "He was always busy with his photographs," said Gabriella. "It cost a fortune — but he won prizes sometimes."

An enlargement of a frosty landscape covered one wall of his room. At first glance one might have taken it to be a modernistic wallpaper, for the sturdy white shimmering branches against the gray background gave a stylized pattern effect. On closer inspection one could see quite clearly that it was a birch wood after a frosty night, enlarged at least a hundred times.

The school photo taken last autumn was there on his desk. Stella picked herself out, sitting a little apart from the group. But she wasn't completely cut off from the others.

She could remember it all quite clearly. It had been a bright autumn day, the air fresh and cool

for the first time, but still none of them had wanted to put on their coats. Madge spent a long time carefully combing her hair, and then she put on more lipstick, for she was convinced it would make a difference on the photograph. Then she sat down, dainty and bolt upright, her legs neatly together and slightly to one side, her short skirt smoothed down over her knees. Next to her sat Barbara — relaxed and natural in trousers and gym sweater as usual, the school's initials slanting across the front. And a little apart from the group, a little to one side, was Stella, wearing a black sweater, her hair falling to her shoulders. When they had proofs of the photograph later they all remarked to Stella, "How good it is of you!" They stood in a circle around her. She was pleased with it herself, and soaked up their admiration like a sponge. Then she laughed and pointed to Nicholas on the photograph. He was standing a little to one side as well, as though he didn't really belong. He was standing right behind her. Perhaps it was sheer chance. Nicholas was standing there with his mouth open, his jacket hanging off him at the shoulders, his plump hands dangling. All the other boys were standing up straight with their arms folded.

Stella laughed and pointed to the photo. "I've got a lovely frame," she said, and thought herself very witty. No one joined in laughing. Nicholas was standing right beside her, grinning with embarrassment. He too had been looking at

Stella's successful photograph. Stella blushed and bit her lip; Christopher detached himself from the circle of friends, turned on his heel, and left the classroom without a word. She could only hope that Nicholas's deafness had stopped his hearing what she'd said.

Even now, such a long time later, Stella still swallowed hard and blushed to think of it. Here she was in Nicholas's room, the picture in her hand, thinking. That's how it always was with Nicholas — somehow everything always went wrong. Stella wanted to push it right out of her mind and not think about it any more. But none of it could be pushed right away. Here in Nicholas's room in the feeble wintry sunlight it all stood out clear and sharp in her memory.

Nicholas had had that photograph on his writing table. What must he have thought when he looked at it? It was so lifelike; they all seemed so near. Then, on the other hand, it was a picture from a time that was past, gone for ever. Strange.

"It must stay there," his mother said softly. "Everything must stay as Nicholas left it. My husband's workroom hasn't been touched, either. The house is so large; Gabriella and I have so much room."

Stella replaced the photograph on the desk. She was freezing, although the sun was shining right into the room and the central heating was on. She was shivering. It was terrible, terrible. Not Nicholas's death, for thousands died every

day, and it was all the same to the person who'd actually done the dying. But for the people left behind, who can't accept it, and even leave the dead person's room untouched — for them it must be terrible.

Stella took a few steps back toward the door, toward Christopher. How good it was to know that he was there, that he had come with her! She was so grateful to him. She had felt compelled to come to Nicholas's home. It had been so important to her and had weighed so heavily on her conscience.

"Perhaps another time," was what she had said to Nicholas, and Christopher had reproached her: ". . . if you'd taken the trouble to get to know him, if you'd just seen his photos, it would never have crossed your mind to have called him handicapped."

And then there was that business with the flowers. They had all forgotten to send his mother flowers after the party to thank her. It was still not too late. Stella had bought yellow tulips, for it was tulip time. The proud, firm blooms made a soft rattling noise as they moved.

Stella hadn't discussed it with anyone. She had wanted to go alone. But then she'd been very pleased when Christopher had come with her — relieved, almost. Christopher had wanted to return a couple of books and papers Nicholas had lent him, and he could do that at the same time.

There was nothing to remind Stella of her first visit. Snow had fallen, and the garden lay silent

in its thick white dress. A path had been cleared from the garden gate up to the clean-swept steps that someone had carefully strewn with fir twigs. It was midday, and everything was bathed in dazzling light. Gabriella opened the door. She was wearing her long hair in plaits as always, and she looked painfully thin in her black dress. The fat, shiny-coated dachshund was standing immobile in the hall looking at them.

"Mother!" called Gabriella. "It's Christopher and Stella!" She propped the door open with her back to let the two step past her into the red warmth of the hall.

Stella took off her overshoes and coat. Then she took the tulips out of their paper.

Nicholas's mother received them in the drawing room, pale and austere in black. Her handshake was firm; she was calm and composed. She would always be in perfect control of herself, Stella realized — and her daughter, too. Gabriella was watching them closely, with cold, inquisitive eyes.

"How kind of you to come to see me!"

Sun slanted across the room. There were flowers and plants everywhere — a potted palm, ferns in a pot, a large aspidistra. The light danced in rainbow colors on the walls, and the whole room seemed alive. It was difficult to believe that in this room Nicholas's party had been held.

Stella presented the flowers and managed to say a few words of thanks for the party. Then suddenly she realized how much Nicholas had looked forward to that party — how much trouble

his mother must have taken over the preparations — and suddenly she just didn't know how she had had the impudence to set foot in the house. She wanted to say something, utter just one single word of explanation or excuse. But there weren't the words to express it.

"Nicholas was so pleased to have you all at his house for once. And he was sure you enjoyed his birthday. He was so pleased."

Those stern features had softened into a smile. It was as if she too believed that Nicholas's party had been a success. Stella's agitation gave way to relief, and she calmed down a little. She had been reproaching herself for so long and now the burden was being lifted from her. Nicholas hadn't taken offense: he'd been pleased.

They sat for a while in the drawing room by the large, round table. There was a dish of sweets and a bowl of fruit standing ready, and soft drinks too. Then they went up to Nicholas's room.

"You mustn't forget your scarf this time," said Nicholas's mother as they were saying good-bye.

The green scarf was hanging, gossamer-light and warm, on a hook in the hall. Stella had noticed it immediately. She took it and put it in her handbag. There was no point now in saying that she'd given it to Nicholas.

"Thank you so much for coming."

Gabriella and her mother stood at the door, Gabriella almost as tall as her parent and just as

dark and self-controlled. They would pull through all right, that was obvious. Gabriella would be able to manage her own life. Her watchful eyes didn't know the meaning of fear, and that, at least, was comforting. It was good to know that, even if you yourself could think of Nicholas with nothing but sadness and regret. His mother would never feel lonely as long as she had Gabriella.

Just as Stella had Christopher now. How pleased she was about Christopher! She pushed her hand through his arm and felt the worn leather jacket beneath her fingers. The air outside was bright and fresh and easy to breathe. They stepped out smartly, cars speeding past them in both directions. They could hear the steady thump of a steam hammer in the distance. A group of young people were sitting on their motorbikes at the side of the road, the engines running and sending out clouds of white smoke from their exhausts. Children, their satchels on their backs, came running out of the gates of a school. Farther away a building crane stretched its arms to the sky. Movement, work, life, everywhere. Stella felt happy. Suddenly her fingers gripped the arm of Christopher's jacket, and she was very close to tears.

"You've got to stop that, little girl."

Sometimes it seemed as if Christopher was all she had left. He was the only one who knew everything, who understood everything. They could talk about it or they could stay silent about

it. It made no difference; Christopher understood her.

It was then that Stella told him the story of the little donkey.

"I thought I'd forgotten it long ago. The book fell to bits and was thrown out, but on Nicholas's birthday out there at the villa I suddenly couldn't help thinking about it. Nicholas was the donkey prince."

"I remember the story, too," said Christopher reflectively. "My mother used to read it to me when I was small. I think we've still got the book — it must be in the old trunk up in the loft. I'll fish it out, if you like. Do you know how the story ends?"

Stella shook her head. She'd forgotten the end, and only the general theme had stuck firmly in her memory.

"The donkey prince turns into a real live prince. A beautiful princess falls in love with him and enables him to shake off his donkey skin and turn into a handsome young man."

"And they lived happily ever after," said Stella sadly. "Why is real life so very different?"

Christopher looked down at her and smiled. For a moment he took her hand in his.

"Perhaps it's not all that different," he said. "Perhaps life is a fairy story if only we knew it."

# 12

Stella came across it one bright, sunny day. There was nothing else to remind her of winter; the birds were twittering under a friendly sky; green shoots were springing from the earth where the snow had melted long ago. The beginning of spring. Easter past. "A" levels creeping nearer.

She found it under the green blotter on her writing table and gazed at it steadily for a long while. How far away all that was, how great the distance between then and now! The things written on that sheet of paper no longer had any value at all. She recognized her own handwriting: "Diagrammatic representation of the structure of a group of young people in a small town."

But the group no longer existed. The friends hadn't met since Nicholas's death. It was gone; the gaiety and the pleasure had vanished. They were no longer the same people after all that had happened, neither to themselves nor to others. They couldn't deceive themselves that they were.

Once they had been inseparable, like those colored circles and lines on the paper. Now the

pattern had been torn apart and there was no new one to be drawn — not with the same people.

Barbara was there, naturally. Stella saw her every day. After all, they sat in the same classroom. And Stan. It was quite obvious that Barbara and Stan were going steady. They were sure to marry one day, but at the moment school was the important thing. And sport. Stan had taken up tennis that spring, Barbara was training seriously too — basketball, long-distance running, and the long jump. People expected big things of her. She had already been noticed by famous coaches. Perhaps she had a great career ahead of her — the Olympic Games, perhaps. Who could tell?

The two sisters, Madge and Camilla — they were still around, too. No one had set eyes on Camilla for weeks, as she was working hard at the hospital. She was becoming engaged soon to someone she had met while on holiday in the mountains. It was all over between Madge and Paul, but that was only to be expected. Madge liked a change and probably had never been very serious about it in the first place. She was sure to have another boyfriend soon. As for Paul, he had left school a few weeks ago. He had failed his Christmas–Spring exams dismally and signed up on a South American steamer. He'd have another go at his exams next year.

Gordon. Stella saw him often. They bumped into each other at school sometimes and ran across each other in the town. They said hello

and were both always in a tearing hurry to be off in the opposite direction. It was strange. They hadn't spoken a word to each other since that evening in the clubhouse. What was there to say? Anyway, Gordon was working extra hard and was feeling very confident about the exams.

Christopher was the only one Stella saw regularly. It was surprising and yet quite natural. On Sundays they went for long walks, always taking the dog with them, and wandering off in all directions through the woods. They often talked about Nicholas. After school they sometimes went to Stella's house, where they sat at her white desk looking up things in the dictionary, working out logarithms, sometimes listening to records or having a cup of coffee together. Or they went to Christopher's. Stella felt quite at home there and had made friends with Christopher's father. He was a kind, good person, rather taciturn, a little bitter. He had a very good job with a building contractor's, but that was just by the way.

"I don't like the way you keep going to that Christopher's house," Stella's mother would complain, for she felt rather uneasy about it. "It's a strange household, and his father's so unapproachable."

They'd discussed it and argued about it so many times. Stella argued more and more often with her mother, who took everything at face value, liked to have everything neat and tidy,

and never listened when Stella tried to explain something — because she didn't understand.

Christopher was a good friend. Was it his fault that his parents were divorced so many years ago? His mother had married again and was living abroad with her new family. But Christopher never talked about her. He was quite indifferent to it all. But lately he'd been taking off his old leather jacket in the hall and hadn't been wearing the same shirt for more than three days on end.

Stella pushed the diagram back under her blotter. There was no point in altering any of it. It was no longer relevant.

So had it been Nicholas after all? It was startling to realize that he had taken on such importance, that they had all changed, become different people, because of him. Only Stan and Barbara had stayed the same as ever.

Stella smiled, briefly, sadly. She was remembering the donkey prince. In the fairy story it had been he who had changed. Here, in her life, it was the donkey prince who had changed all of them.

Puzzling . . . strange . . .

# SINCE THAT PARTY

Nicholas is always odd man out. Clumsy, unattractive, often ill. No one pays him much attention — in fact, everyone in school tries to avoid him. Everyone, that is, except quiet, shy Christopher.

Stella especially tries to avoid Nicholas, but he adores Stella — pretty, vivacious Stella, the life of the group.

Then Nicholas gives a party and everything comes to a head, dramatically, unexpectedly. When it's all over, Stella knows that nothing can ever be the same again. Not for Stella. Not for Christopher. And certainly not for Nicholas. Poor Nicholas.

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